

# THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 30

**Mrs Dalloway IV: Textual Analysis- I**

Hello learners and welcome to the fourth lecture in our continuing discussion of Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the previous lecture, we had ended at a point where Clarissa walking down Bond Street had reflected on this hazy specter-like monster of influenza which threatened to overturn her life and overwhelm her especially when she found herself in moments of pure pleasure and happiness. Now, as Clarissa is walking down the street, she is interrupted by a sort of commotion, a large and public commotion when a car produces a sound like a gunshot. This turns out to be a car in which the Prime Minister was driving and the traffic jam and the commotion that it causes leads to the interruption of many people's paths.

Many people have to stop walking or going wherever they were going because the roads were temporarily blocked. One of these people, like Clarissa, who is interrupted and who turns to see and who cannot go, is Septimus Warren Smith. This is the point in the novel where we meet this character who is going to be the most important, the most powerful presence in the novel other than Clarissa. In fact, it is difficult to decide who or if one of the two deserves this label of the protagonist. In fact, they can both be said to be protagonists who together educate readers in how to perceive sickness or how to perceive human vulnerability in its most varied and extreme forms.

Okay, so let us see how the narrator introduces Septimus to us. Woolf writes, and I quote,

Septimus Warren Smith, who found himself unable to pass, heard him. Septimus Warren Smith, aged about 30, pale-faced, a beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazel eyes which had that look of apprehension in them, which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?

Now, this is a very powerful passage, mainly because it introduces a character to us. We become acquainted with Septimus through the physical markers of his identity, that is, how old he is, what is the shape and structure and appearance of his face, what kind of clothes and shoes he is wearing, which signify his position in the class hierarchy of England and finally the most important thing we understand is his psychological state or rather we are given a small hint, a small clue with which we can decode or we can try and grasp the psychological state in which Septimus is. And that is a look of apprehension in his hazel eyes. What is this look of apprehension? To describe the look of apprehension, the narrator gives us an image. It's the image of a whip, and the narrator describes to us how Septimus might perceive the world.

The narrator has deduced or inferred from the look of apprehension that she has found in Septimus' hazel eyes. So how does Septimus or how do we think or how does the narrator think Septimus views the world? The Septimus views the world in a state of apprehension, and to understand the state of apprehension, the narrator describes a very vivid image. The image is that of, these are the words, the world has raised its whip, where will it descend? It's a sentence that is both vivid and vague. It is vague because the world has raised a whip. What does that mean? The world does not specify a particular individual or an agent or an actor. We do not know who is doing this action of raising a whip. On the other hand, it is very vivid. This sentence is very vivid because we know how a whip works. A whip, when it is in the air, is quivering with a sort of tension. It has a great deal of energy that is compacted into its tip. It is a strand of leather which is held on one hand and which is when flicked, it carries all of the tension transmitted to its tip. And we know that it is a very vivid image because we dread the moment that when this whip, which at this point is at its highest position, will eventually come down with a great deal of force. And when it does come down, it will cause a great deal of violence. It will create a great deal of pain for someone or something. Even if the whip is not used on an object such as an animal or some kind of a source, the whip will still produce a lot of violence.

There is energy that is stored in the tip of this whip that's raised and this energy will be dissipated somehow in the form that will cause violence. Now, this is the anticipation. This is the thought that Septimus seems to hold in his mind. And this kind of a psychological process, the fact that the psychological process is undergoing, the narrator has deduced it by looking at a gaze in Septimus' eyes, a gaze that seems to signify apprehension.

Now, let us reflect on why the narrator introduces Septimus by describing this very strange, vivid, but also vague sort of image. The goal behind describing this image and introducing

Septimus through it is to help readers understand how widespread was the sense of apprehension in the time that Woolf was writing *Mrs. Dalloway*. Not everyone described apprehension in these ways, but there was a great deal of similar psychological processes that other people were undertaking in their own minds, whether consciously or unconsciously, at the time that Woolf was writing. Further, there were different causes for this kind of apprehension or anxiety or dread. What are these different causes?

Now, we will find out that in the case of Septimus, the cause of this anxiety or apprehension is the trauma that he has experienced as a soldier in the First World War. However, we have just read another description of the kind of anxiety that Clarissa experiences. That anxiety has nothing to do with the war, or maybe it has, but it appears to have nothing to do with the war. In fact, it appears to derive more completely from the experience of being sick, from the experience of having contracted the influenza. Now, the goal narrator achieves by providing these two descriptions of anxiety caused on the face of it by different things is to combine them and to enable readers to view them, these two forms of anxieties, as not diametrically opposite, but rather as emerging from a shared human condition. What is it that Septimus and Clarissa share? They share a kind of vulnerability which was becoming more and more universal, given the historical events of early 20th century England. So, this kind of a shared vulnerability is what the novel is teaching us as readers to learn to be able to recognize. And in this description of the raised whip, which a vague entity like the world has raised, Septimus' apprehension is described most immediately. But more generally, the narrator invites us to view this kind of apprehension as being of a part, as having some sort of kinship with the constant and unconscious state of dread that Clarissa experiences as well.

Now, we leave Clarissa for a moment and we inhabit the experience and surroundings of Septimus for a bit. We learn that Septimus is accompanied by a young woman named Lucrezia. This woman is taking care of Septimus. We learn something about her. And we learned something about what I just spoke a little bit earlier; about the shared human vulnerability of these characters. Everyone is suffering in different ways. Some people's suffering is more visible, some people's suffering is less visible, and some individual suffering is better understood than others. But there are surprising contradictions there. Some forms of suffering are visible but not understood. Some forms of suffering are understood but not visible. And it is these different nuances, it is these different degrees of knowability of human suffering that the novel is deeply concerned with and which the novel teaches us how to perceive.

We then read about Lucrezia. The narrator writes, for she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he was dead. She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible, sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing vessels, falling down, all were terrible, and she would not kill himself, and she could tell no one. Septimus has been working too hard. That was all she could say to her own mother.

To love makes one solitary, she thought. Now, we see a great deal of cynicism and despair in these lines. Where do these cynicism and despair come from? They come from the unfair burden of the labor of care that rests on Lucrezia's shoulders. Why is it unfair? It is unfair because being a woman, being the wife of a veteran, Lucrezia is expected to perform a great deal of labor, labor that it is assumed that she would naturally want to perform. That is one source of that source of despair. But really, what is the major source of that despair? It is the lack of understanding. Septimus seems to be afflicted by a condition that very few people actually understand. And the experts, the people who have some knowledge of the human body, the care of the human body, of medicine, of health care. These experts, these professionals who Lucrezia expects to help her out, they fail to do that. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter.

So, doctors fail to recognize any problem, any disability or any sickness in Septimus and yet Lucrezia sits all day and all she can see is a sickness. So that leads her to this expression, far rather would she that he was dead. And generally, we are given a window into the frustrations and the struggles that the labor of providing care produces and entails in a character like Lucrezia. So, this expression, to love makes one solitary, right? This expression refers both to a universal human condition, which can refer to an emotional inequality between two individuals, i.e. Septimus' neurological condition renders him incapable of articulating, expressing or even engaging in the modes of care and love that a marriage deserves. But Lucrezia having no knowledge, having no expert knowledge of this neurological condition is unable to perceive why Septimus cannot engage in the normal acts of expressing love, care and affection. And therefore, her only conclusion here seems to be that to love makes one solitary, that she, Lucrezia, is being punished with solitude because of how much she loves Septimus.

Now we can see how this is a very painful thought; this is a very disconcerting thought and the narrator provides this unvarnished and painful and tragic fact to enable readers to broaden the reserves of their sympathy and to try and find a place for Lucrezia while they

sympathize with the experiences of all human beings we meet in this novel. Lucrezia goes on,

And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; He was brave; he was not Septimus now. She'd put on her lace collar. She'd put on her new hat and he never noticed; and he was happy without her. Nothing could make her happy without him! Nothing! He was selfish. So, men are. For he was not ill, Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him. She spread her hand before her. Look, her wedding ring slipped- she had grown so thin. It was she who suffered-but she had nobody to tell.

Now, these two passages continue that description, very difficult and very painful for us as readers to read and to accept, but nonetheless very important for us and for the narrative to establish its goals of teaching readers the right modes of empathetic seeing. The first thought to note is that Lucrezia approaches Septimus' condition from a perspective of normal masculinity. In this perspective, masculinity involves public displays of physical strength and bravery. Septimus has performed some of these public displays. He has fought in the First World War; therefore, he is certified as brave. He is also certified as a healthy, normal young man through that display and that performance of masculine bravery.

Now, having been that person, Septimus seems to have become a different person. He has said that he wants to kill himself. Maybe not as many times in public, but clearly, he has said this in private, and that is how Lucrezia has learned of it. This produces a great shock and confusion for Lucrezia because she is unable to put together how these two versions of Septimus belong to the same person. A man who has displayed such obvious bravery, the same man now says that he wants to kill himself. There is something very shocking. Not only the act of saying this, that he wants to kill himself, but the fact that he is able to say this, having done the kind of things he has done before. So, a great deal of confusion, and the narrator does not explain or rationalize this. The narrator simply presents this information to us and demands and expects that we extend an act of empathetic imagination towards Lucrezia. Lucrezia calls Septimus selfish, and we may disagree with her.

We may know that Septimus is not intentionally doing anything to hurt Lucrezia, but the narrator does not say that, and the narrator challenges us to forgive and to sympathize with Lucrezia without making an argument for her ignorance. The narrator goes on, speaking on behalf of Lucrezia, that it was she who suffered, but she had nobody to tell. A deeply moving sentence, a deeply ironic and tragic sentence, ironic chiefly because both Lucrezia

and Septimus have an equal and equally true claim to making this statement about themselves. They can both claim that they suffer more and they suffer more than others. They suffer the most because they have nobody to tell, that nobody understands their suffering, that it is invisible. This invisibility and their inability to explain to someone else, to explain to observers how deep their suffering goes and how much it shakes them and how much it shapes them, heightens and intensifies the degree of their suffering. Both Lucrezia and Septimus are equally valid candidates for claiming this kind of suffering, and both of them fail to find this true audience.

The novel seeks to become that sort of audience and it seeks to create that audience who can understand Lucrezia's and Septimus' suffering without the intellectual armature or the apparatuses which will help us understand. In fact, the novel as a whole produces the emotional apparatus with which we can perceive this kind of suffering. Now, having introduced Septimus, we return to Clarissa and the narrator describes how after the car had gone, that is, the car which produced this sound like a gunshot, after it went on, and how the traffic cleared and individuals then began to resume their interrupted course of movement on the streets of London.

The narrator describes something about how people come together in the streets of London, which reflects both the war as well as the pandemic. And this is what we will read now.

The car had gone but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailor shops on both sides of bond street. For thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way- to the window. Choosing a pair of gloves- should they be to the elbow or above it, lemon or pale grey? - ladies stopped; When the sentence was finished, something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in all the hat shops and tailor shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead of the flag; of Empire.

Now, this is a remarkable passage because it describes something very, very essential, very, very common and very deeply moving about the experience of being in London in the wake of the First World War. Now, the metaphors and the images that are used to describe that experience give us a sense of the novel's larger intellectual and empathetic goals, which I have mentioned are to create a mode of perception which does justice to both the experience of the influenza pandemic and the widespread death and devastation produced

by World War I. So, the first instance of images is that of water. Now, once the car has gone and people start moving on the interrupted course, this resumption of pedestrian movement on Bond Street is described as a ripple. A ripple is caused when a surface of a liquid is interrupted by something like a storm.

Now, the resumption of normal life in London is like a ripple. A stone is thrown onto the surface of a liquid and waves emanate from the point of interruption. Now, in a way, these waves signal normalcy. They signal a very normal return to normal service. On the other hand, ripples also refer to the spread of disease. Pandemics are frequently described and measured and clocked and their progress tracked through waves. Just as the virus evolves, just as the virus is locked into struggle with human attempts to neutralize it, human attempts to make it powerless, make it unable to cause symptoms of fever, death and so on, the virus evolves. And as the virus evolves, at some point it evolves into a form which cannot be contained by vaccinations or quarantine or other forms of human isolation and treatment. And once a resistant variant of the virus emerges (this kind of language will be familiar to everyone in the year 2024 because we have just witnessed the COVID-19 pandemic). As a resistant variant of the virus emerges, it causes a new wave of disease, death and destruction. So, these ripples remind readers of how both normalcy, that is shopping for groceries in the street of London, and how devastation, that is death, disease, funerals, can both spread in waves. And in fact, death can hide in the comforting appearance of normalcy. So that is one.

The second is the image of a vibration. Something happens. The car interrupts the normal pedestrian movement and once the car has gone and pedestrians are free to move as they were moving, somehow this return to normalcy, does not quite feel very normal. And there is a hint of a vibration. Even though there is nothing wrong and people are free to move, in the way people move, after they are interrupted once, the narrator perceives a kind of vibration. There is an emotional appeal. And where is this emotional appeal? In the hat shops and the tailor shops, when strangers look at each other. When people see each other going about their normal lives, immediately after the war has ended and disease is spreading, they think of death. They don't speak of death. They go about their normal lives. They don't act as if they are going to die. They live as if they are going to be alive. But they think of death. They think of the flag. They think of empire. Now, flag and empire refer very obviously to the First World War, but these are only the most visible and obviously recognizable markers of death and destruction. The words vibration and ripple, as I've

described earlier, refer to other less visible, more obviously understood causes of death, which was, in this case, the influenza pandemic.

Now, after walking and taking this long and reflective and very detailed walk-through Bond Street, Clarissa returns home. And as she returns home, she goes straight to the sick room and it is in this sick room that she spends a great deal of time. It is after her recovery from influenza that she has been advised both by the doctors and her husband to not spend a lot of time in the normal areas of the house, but rather retire and spend more time recovering in a different room, which has been created sort of like a quarantine zone.

We will read her thoughts in this room and how these thoughts remind her of her close brush with death in the next lecture. We will also read how other characters perceive their proximity to death, in particular Peter Walsh. And finally, we will refer to the party and how the scene and how the information of Septimus' tragic fate reaches Clarissa at this very, very obviously pleasurable social event in the next two lectures.

Thank you!