

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 11
Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway – Part 3

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Mrs. Dalloway, coming to the window with her arms full of sweet peas, looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry. Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?

“Let us go on, Septimus,” said his wife, a little woman, with large eyes in a sallow pointed face; an Italian girl.

But Lucrezia herself could not help looking at the motor car and the tree pattern on the blinds. Was it the Queen in there — the Queen going shopping?

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Virginia Woolf’s novel, “Mrs. Dalloway”. The principal traumatized character in the story is Septimus Smith. He suffers from PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder.

It happens a lot to soldiers when they come back from the war and they cannot integrate back essentially in the civilian space. The trauma of Septimus Smith is essentially an experience and disintegration and its disintegration is medical but equally, it is social, existential, and also quite political. It is seen how there is an essential feeling of waste in Septimus.

He looks at himself as a wasted leftover from the war and the feeling of being leftover, the feeling of being not functional, this knowledge of non-functionality is what informs this melancholia. The word ‘melancholia’ is used here in a very classic Freudian sense. Melancholia has a sense of self-loathing, where the ego is depleted, the subject loathes himself, hates himself, and is disgusted with himself because of his non-functionality.

It is accompanied by a sense of purposelessness seen increasingly in Septimus. He does not know what to do. He is completely dazed out and he is just completely directionless, he does not have any direction in the future. Septimus could also be interpreted or the experience of Septimus could be interpreted as something which is out of sync with time because also there is a degree of non-synchronicity with time.

He cannot merge in a time. He cannot merge into space-time in a post-war metropolis. The space-time becomes a capsule; becomes a compound a chronotope and his inability to integrate through the chronotope is something that informs Septimus's trauma as an experience essentially in disintegration. Septimus is married to a woman called Lucrezia, an Italian girl.

She is someone who is an outsider to London. There are different kinds of outsideness, different orders, and different ontology of outsideness here. Septimus is British but he feels like an outsider in London because of the war and there is no place for someone like him in a post-war London and no one can empathize with him. He is just a leftover from the war.

He is someone who did not die, as someone who survived the war. He did not have any empathetic gaze on him. There is no one that he can connect to and there is a sense of being an outsider. Lucrezia, his wife is quite politically an outsider. She is an Italian girl and being an Italian means she was on the other side of the war with England. There is therefore that degree of outsideness present here.

There are different kinds of outsideness here operating almost simultaneously in this novel. The most interesting thing is the outsideness of Clarissa Dalloway who is otherwise a very privileged white wealthy woman, British, and very privileged. She is about to throw a very posh party where some of the most distinguished people in London are to be invited to come, but despite that, she is a complete outsider to all her activities.

There is a sense of alienation that she suffers as well. The outsider quality is something that taps into in this novel quite extensively. "Let us go on, Septimus," said his wife, a little woman, with large eyes in a sallow pointed face; an Italian girl. But Lucrezia herself could

not help looking at the motor car and the tree pattern on the blinds. Was it the Queen in there - the Queen going shopping? ”

There was this motor car explosion previously and people suspected there was someone very important in the car perhaps a member of the royalty, the royal family. This whole idea of kind of peeping into something in the metropolis with half knowledge becomes quite symbolic. We do not quite know; we do not quite have a sense of identity.

London is a very fast-moving metropolis where everything is half said, half articulated, half shown, half-known; and the sense of almost there is this translucent quality something between transparent and opaque. This is translucence, that categorizes the post-war metropolis and nothing is known. It becomes into something quite liminal as well.

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But her husband, for they had been married four, five years now, jumped, started, and said, “All right!” angrily, as if she had interrupted him.

People must notice; people must see. People, she thought, looking at the crowd staring at the motor car; the English people, with their children and their horses and their clothes, which she admired in a way; but they were “people” now, because Septimus had said, “I will kill myself”; an awful thing to say. Suppose they had heard him? She looked at the crowd. Help, help! she wanted to cry out to butchers’ boys and women. Help! Only last autumn she and Septimus had stood on the Embankment wrapped in the same cloak and, Septimus reading a paper instead of talking, she had snatched it from him and laughed in the old man’s face who saw them! But failure one conceals. She must take him away into some park.

“Now we will cross,” she said.

She had a right to his arm, though it was without feeling. He would give her, who was so simple, so impulsive, only twenty-four, without friends in England, who had left Italy for his sake, a piece of horse

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““Now we will cross,” she said. She had a right to his arm, though it was without feeling. He would give her, who was so simple, so impulsive, only twenty-four, without friends, in England, who had left Italy for his sake, a piece of bone.” This image is very important. A piece of bone, something which does not have flesh, something which does not have life in it, something which does not have any animation.

This is completely a non-animated object, something which is dead essentially, a piece of fossil. Septimus over here is a piece of bone, drying away, which is dead already, and fossilizing. This is unfair to Lucretia because as she is an outsider, she is an Italian, she married him out of love and she left everything for him essentially to come to London which is a strange city for her.

Now, he is an outsider where he is disintegrated. He is thinking of committing suicide. She feels doubly alienated, politically and also existentially, linguistically, culturally, in every sense of the term. She is very alienated, very cut off from the surroundings. A piece of bone imagery is interesting, is an important piece, it is an important symbol that she is trying to clutch his arm because she has a right to his arm. She is married to him.

She has a right to his arm legally and emotionally but then his arm is a piece of bone which is to say symbolically that he is essentially a dead person, a zombie, a leftover from the war. This feeling of being a leftover is something which we see quite; it is a recursive thing in “Mrs. Dalloway”. He is not quite dead but he is not quite alive either.

This liminal location is almost like Dante's hell where there is a lake one has to cross before death. Septimus in London becomes almost his sea of oblivion before he can go to the other world. He is somewhere stuck between life and death, London becomes his translucent liminal landscape for Septimus.

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sentimentally, by this sort of thing — poor women waiting to see the queen go past — poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War — tut-tut — actually had tears in his eyes. A breeze flaunting ever so warmly down the Mall through the thin trees, past the bronze heroes, lifted some flag flying in the British breast of Mr. Bowley and he raised his hat as the car turned into the Mall and held it high as the car approached; and let the poor mothers of Pimlico press close to him, and stood very upright. The car came on.

Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Every one looked up.

Dropping dead down the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose, and whatever it did, wherever it went, out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon

The skywriting aeroplane is an advertisement aeroplane here. An aeroplane presumably advertising for toffee in London and that becomes an important symbol because like the Big Ben, the giant massive clock in London which chimes in every time.

It does in an hour, 12 o'clock, 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock; the Big Ben chimes in and the chiming of the Big Ben is an announcement of clock time in some sense which cuts into people's reveries, which comes to the people's epiphanies, which makes something standardized and uniform. It is a production of uniformity Big Ben, uniform time, uniform temporality because that time is shared by everyone, that time is spread across, it is more of a distributive order of time supposedly democratic.

But what it also does it becomes this tyrannical time, the normative time or shall we say the chrononormative order, chrono is time, normative is hegemonic, the hegemonic time which consumes and subsumes all other psychological locations in time, people's reveries, people's dreams, people's aspirations, people's desires which are their own psychological time those have all been consumed by the announcement of Big Ben.

Big Ben in this novel is the patriarchal order of hegemonic time, chrononormative, construct and architecture of chrononormative order. It is similar to what happens with the skywriting plane. The skywriting plane wanders across the London sky and is almost equidistant from

everyone observing it. But to each person is a different thing and to Septimus, this becomes a very traumatic reminder in some sense of a bombing aeroplane.

This chrononormative and the visual order are important. The fact that everything is equidistant, everything is positioned equally from that skywriting aeroplane is important for us to understand. Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky and. It is interesting how some seemingly minor characters in “Mrs. Dalloway” become important, Mrs. Coates for example, over here is just a minor character but she notices the plane for the first time.

She spots a plane for the first time and the spotting becomes important in some sense. The sound of an aeroplane boomed ominously into the ears of the crowd. The ‘ominous’ is a very important word. There, it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind which curled and twisted, writing something making letters in the sky. Everyone looked up. It was writing something in the sky.

Everyone looked up and the plane is almost equidistant from every observer and this equidistance become important. The fact that everything becomes sort of objectively spread and everyone looking at the plane is equally distant from it. It is writing something which can be seen from every position in London. These factors become important.

“Dropping dead down the aeroplane soared straight up, curved in a loop, raced, sank, rose and wherever it did, wherever it went, out fluttered behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled and wreathed upon the sky in letters.”

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the sky in letters. But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky, began writing a K, an E, a Y perhaps?

“Glaxo,” said Mrs. Coates in a strained, awe-stricken voice, gazing straight up, and her baby, lying stiff and white in her arms, gazed straight up.

“Kreemo,” murmured Mrs. Bletchley, like a sleep-walker. With his hat held out perfectly still in his hand, Mr. Bowley gazed straight up. All down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky. As they looked the whole world became perfectly silent, and a flight of gulls crossed the sky, first one gull leading, then another, and in this extraordinary silence and peace, in this pallor, in this purity, bells struck eleven times, the sound fading up there among the gulls.

The aeroplane turned and raced and swooped exactly where it liked, swiftly, freely, like a skater —

“That’s an E,” said Mrs. Bletchley — or a dancer —

“But what letters? A C was it? an E, then an L? Only for a moment did they lie still; then they moved and melted and were rubbed out up in the sky, and the aeroplane shot further away and again, in a fresh space of sky began writing a K, an E and Y perhaps?” Letters are coming after each other and then there is a formation of word, informational meaning. This is a meaningful production in fast consuming post-war metropolis.

London, in this novel, is a very highly consuming metropolis, everyone is consuming everything and it is trying to move on from the traumatic landscape very quickly. They have advertisements coming in on different modes of consumption are in a skywriting aeroplane. It is something which is advertising for seducing people to buy it, etc. So, the seduction process is always there.

But it is shown how the same aeroplane will mean something very different to Septimus Smith because that will remind him in some sense of the trauma of his experience in the trenches. It is very traumatic, very dark, and very ominous. The word ‘ominous’ is already there as stated. The skywriting aeroplane which is otherwise an innocuous instrument of advertisement will be perceived by Septimus as something ominous.

Something which is about foreboding, something which is a carrier of violence, destruction. An E, a Y perhaps. Glaxo said Mrs. Coates in a strained, awe-stricken voice, gazing straight up and her baby lying stiff and white in the arms gazed straight up. Everyone is gazing at the

aeroplane. An aeroplane has a god-like gaze on the metropolis as well. It is looking down at the metropolis. “Kreemo”, murmured Mrs. Bletchley like a sleep-walker”. Sleep-walker is an important word.

There is this zombie quality, this is somnambulist quality, somnambulistic quality about the walkers in London. They are never quite, they are not quite away from the trauma. Although there are machines of advertisements, machines of consumption machines the production, the spectral quality of the war, spectral quality of trauma is very much there as a lingering presence.

The sleep-walker metaphor is important and because Woolf is such a fine writer we need to pay attention to all these little details, very subtle hints that she is dropping. With his hat held out perfectly still in his hand, Mrs. Bowley gazed straight up. The word ‘gaze’ a number of times as Woolf would only use the word very deliberately, and casually.

She wants to say something, wants to convey something. All down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky. As they looked the whole world became perfectly silent and a flight of gulls crossed the sky. One gull leading, then another, and in this extraordinary silence and peace in this pallor, in this purity, belts struck eleven times. The sound fading up there among the gulls.

This is a very complex audiovisual image in the novel and has something very cinematic about it and a Woolf like most Modernists of the times most of the contemporaries was quite fascinated by cinema. Cinema was a new mode of expression back then. A lot of the writing drew a lot from cinema; the cinematic techniques of visual consumption, visual production, visual narratives, etc. As we can see the gulls crossing the sky one by one, it becomes a very important image.

There is the silence, pallor, everyone just shuts up, everyone quietens down, everyone looks at the sky as it is some kind of a divine design happening. But what is also quite there conspicuously is the fact that there is that spectral quality of wars, there is a residual lingering

presence of war, a carrier of velocity, and something that forwards evil, destruction, etc. But this extraordinary silence is not quite silence of fascination.

There is also silence of anticipation or silence which is ominous in quality, a silence which is a spectrum quality, a silence which is something which is about to suffer. The quality of suffering violence, that quality of suffering this velocity that comes with violence is very much there. Even though this is a skywriting aeroplane advertising toffee, there is that quality of violence.

There is this quality of destruction about it which is never quite far away. “The aeroplane turned and raced and swooped exactly where it liked, swiftly, freely like a skater. The swooping again is a gull-like quality; a violent quality about the aeroplane which is very much there. “That is an E”, said Mrs. Bletchley or dancer. ”

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...and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it), and shutting off the smoke, away and away it rushed, and the smoke faded and assembled itself round the broad white shapes of the clouds.

It had gone; it was behind the clouds. There was no sound. The clouds to which the letters E, G, or L had attached themselves moved freely, as if destined to cross from West to East on a mission of the greatest importance which would never be revealed, and yet certainly so it was — a mission of the greatest importance. Then suddenly, as a train comes out of a tunnel, the aeroplane rushed out of the clouds again, the sound boring into the ears of all people in the Mall, in the Green Park, in Piccadilly, in Regent Street, in Regent’s Park, and the bar of smoke curved behind and it dropped down, and it soared up and wrote one letter after another — but what word was it writing?

Lucrezia Warren Smith, sitting by her husband’s side on a seat in Regent’s Park in the Broad Walk, looked up.

““It is toffee”, murmured Mrs. Bowley and the car went in at the gates and nobody looked at it, and shutting off the smoke away and away it rushed and the smoke faded and assembled itself round the broad white shapes of the clouds. It had gone; it was behind the clouds. There was no sound. The clouds to which the letters E, G or L had attached themselves moved freely as if destined to cross from West to East on – a mission of the greatest importance. Then suddenly, as a train comes out of a tunnel, the aeroplane rushed out of the clouds again, the sound boring into the ears of all the people in the mall in the Green Park, in Piccadilly, in

Regent Street, in Regent's Park and the bar of smoke curved behind it and dropped down and it soared up and wrote one letter after another – but what word was it writing?"

There is so much of a difference between the violent aeroplane of destruction and the advertisement aeroplane of consumption that the borderlines are quite blurred in some sense. But what is also important is the unpredictability of the movement; no one quite knows whether it is gone or is coming back, if it is recursive, whether they make a reappearance, we do not quite know.

It is not known yet what word was it writing. This aeroplane becomes a very interesting reflection of the unknowability of meaning and a poor swarm metropolis. We do not quite know what the word means, we do not quite know how meanings are formed. The free formation of a word which would have a meaning potentially and can be consumed the unknowability of it becomes interesting over here.

The letters come one after the other, in little letters of clouds and then they form together and form one word which is a toffee name which is an advertisement name, but the point is people do not quite know what it is. And now we have Septimus looking at it. Lucrezia Warren Smith sitting by husband's side on a seat in Regent's Park in the Broad Walk looked up.

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"Look, look, Septimus!" she cried. For Dr. Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously the matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself.

So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.

It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t . . . o . . . f . . .

"K . . . R . . ." said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say "Kay Arr" close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper's, which rasped his sp . . . liciously and sent

““Look. Look Septimus!” she cried. For Dr. Holmes had told her to make her husband (who had nothing whatever seriously matter with him but was a little out of sorts) take an interest in things outside himself.” This is a very important little commentary, an oblique reference. This blink and miss reference has a very important work because it is actually very packed.

Dr. Holmes was one of the physicians treating Septimus had said very arrogantly there is nothing wrong with Septimus. It is just a little out of sorts. There is a welding as it were between patriarchy and medicine, between masculinity and medicine. These male doctors seem to know everything about the traumatic patient.

They can declare very empathically and emphatically that there is nothing wrong with them very arrogantly. There is an autobiographical reference to be teased out of this because Woolf herself is a sufferer of depression. One of her doctors was called George Savage unfortunately who had a very similar attitude towards her in terms of not declaring, not acknowledging that she is sick.

The doctor did not acknowledge that she is ill. She was prescribed a very heavy diet of milk and bananas to gain weight. There is that empathy Woolf has as a writer towards Septimus; we can see it because although Holmes and other doctors some called Bradshaw they declare quite arrogantly and quite certainly there is nothing wrong with Septimus and that makes it more complex for him.

The denial of any problem, the rejection of any problem is something that makes it even more accentuated for Septimus. They prescribe the Septimus should take a look outside of himself so according to them Septimus’s problem is a problem of self-absorption, is too absorbed with himself, absorbed with his ego. He has been asked to step outside of his ego in some sense.

And that is something which has been conveyed to his wife and she is passively following the doctor's orders so to speak. “So thought, Septimus looking up they are signaling to me. Not needed in actual words that is he could not read the language yet, but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words

languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity. And laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signaling their intention to provide him for nothing, forever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks.” There is the sense of being overwhelmed in Septimus. He is always overwhelmed with emotion and we will find later why is he emoting so unpredictably, so overly and we find that this has come from a long experience and repression.

He has been trained to repress his feelings as a man, as a soldier that is the training that is an emotional training he has received. And right now when he is breaking, when he is caving and when he is fragile, he is overcompensating for that. This is an example of overcompensation that he is actually overly emoting and that it becomes a problem.

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“K . . . R . . .” said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say “Kay Arr” close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvellous discovery indeed — that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses’ heads, feathers on ladies’, so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.



“It was toffee; they were advertising toffee, a nursemaid told Rezia. Together they began to spell t . . . o . . . f . . . “K . . . R . . .” said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say “Kay Arr” close to his ear, deeply, softly like a mellow organ but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which concussing broke.” One has to have a very good description of the cognitive system.

It is a slowdown process, a decelerated process, a de-familiarized process and this is again a very conceptual take on trauma. Trauma has an experience in de-familiarization. Your normal

cognitive process is de-familiarized, it is decelerated, slowed down, is reshaped and everything, every sound, every image, every word around comes to you, comes to the traumatic person, traumatic subject in different shapes, in different diagrams, in different designs.

The whole experience is just intensified and Septimus's spinal cord just takes it and the intense the nervous system, his cognitive system takes it and absorbs it completely. It hits his brain, the waves hit his brain and concussing it breaks giving the cave. A marvelous discovery indeed that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions for one must be scientific above everything else, above all scientific can quicken trees into life.

The human brain is a magnificent machine, there again the scientific rhetoric is used but it is also parodied in some sense because this in a way in this entire novel can be seen as a critique of science, as a critique of biomedical science which seems to know everything, which seems to be certain about the human problems whereas the human emotions are in fact more complex than what the bioscience can predict or formulate.

“Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with their leaves alight and the color thinning and thickening from blue to green to of a hollow wave like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies, so proudly they rose and fell so superbly, would have made him mad, sent him mad, but he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes, he would see no more.”

There seems to be a sinusitic quality about Septimus. It means the condition where different sense perceptions crisscross each other. Hence, what you can see you can also smell that, what you can smell you can also touch.

The tactile sense, the olfactory sense, in the visual sense everything is coalesced together and it becomes very complex system of perception and reception so and that becomes too much to take for him and he just caves and he shuts himself down. He shut his eyes, he would see

no more. It becomes the only act of agency that he has, the only motor active agency that he can exhibit.

He can shut himself down because it seems to be he is a very fragile person emotionally and then every emotion to him comes to him with a lot of intensity with de-familiarized diagram, de-familiarized design. Everything to him is an experience as a moving experience, it is an overwhelming experience. There is only so much he can take. He shuts himself down as a subject.

The decision to shut yourself down, this decision to shut down his senses, something which anticipates his eventual suicide which can also be seen as an act of shutting down the system. His suicide at the end of the novel also can be seen as an act of agency, the only agency available to him because he is so repressed, he is so hunted down by the biomedical practitioners as well as the doctors, no one seems to understand him.

His complete lack of empathy pushes him towards the only active agency available to him which is active suicide, which is something which is anticipated by the decision to shut down the senses.