

**Trauma and Literature**  
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**Lecture – 12**  
**Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway – Part 4**

This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature”, where we looking at Virginia Woolf’s novel “Mrs. Dalloway”. This is to use some theory; some trauma theory, some existential philosophy, and some of the historical background of this text that we can combine those perspectives.

It is seen how the historical setting is post First World War London as London which is trying very hard to look normal, to look speedy, to look sophisticated, and look urban. It is trying very hard to move on but there is this very spectral presence of the war which is always there. It is never quite away from the setting of this landscape. The spectrality is materialized. It just comes in the foreground in a very unsettling way by various figures and by various machines.

The figure that is introduced to the post-traumatic stress disorder sufferer, the PTSD sufferer is the soldier in the name of Septimus Smith. He has come back from the war and is suffering from trauma. But his trauma is compounded by the fact that there is no empathy at all in terms of the doctor's perspective on him and the doctor's gaze on him. The gaze that Septimus suffers from the medical practitioners in this novel is not a gaze of empathy. It is not a gaze of understanding.

It is not a gaze of kindness. It is a gaze of very clinical, empirical quantifying mechanisms and he is just being seen as a problem. There is a denial of his problems. The doctors’ Holmes and Bradshaw keep telling Septimus and his wife that there is nothing wrong with him, but he should be made to rest, he should be made to think outside of himself.

In other words, his ego seems to be his problem here. The fact that he is so absorbed in himself that seems to be a problem. There is no connection at all between his mind and the material conditions around him and that disconnect is something talked about already. There

is a disconnection and disintegration, the fact that he cannot integrate back with the people with the setting, with the urban metropolis.

There is a sense of being left out, leftover, liquidated, shut down and we stopped at the last section if you remember he is shutting himself down. Septimus was shutting himself down because he was literally overwhelmed by all the sensations around him, all the machines around him. He cannot take it anymore. He cannot emote anymore. There are too many of emotions that are coming out, welling out of the system.

He is essentially having a system shut down and we talked about how the systemic shutdown, the fact that he is choosing to shut himself down that seems to be the only agency available to him, the only agency left to him for him because there is nothing else that he can do. He is completely agencyless and that decision to shut himself down when he sees too much, too many sensations around him is an anticipation of his eventual suicide.

He jumps in the window and kills himself. That suicide of course we will read that in detail in due course but that suicide may be interpreted as a very extreme action of the agency, the only agency that he has over his life, the only ownership that he has and that is over his life, so he kills himself by jumping from a building a Georgian window. Now so Septimus's detachment, disintegration, and distancing from everything around him.

So the whole idea of shutting yourself down becomes like you mentioned an extreme act of agency. Now Septimus is disconnected as mentioned. We should be able to study that medically but also historically because as we can see when he comes back from the war he is not treated as a war hero. Because of that there is a degree of disavowal, rejection that he suffers from society.

People interested in the study of War and Literature and Trauma would also know that one of the key wars in which this happened systematically was the Vietnam war because of the Vietnam-American war that was the one which PTSD, a post-traumatic stress disorder, the soldier trauma was classified in the medical dictionary as a recognizable disease.

Mrs. Dalloway may be seen as some kind of anticipation of what happened to the veterans in the Vietnam War because there was a sense of shame about the war as well. It is more complicated than the Vietnam War, but even the First World War, when Septimus comes back he is not treated as a war hero; he is just seen as something of a leftover, someone who cannot fit in anywhere.

There is no empathy, there is no recognition; the sense of shame about him as well and that compounds his suffering. Septimus's character is examined not just medically but that is actually compounded by the existential rejection that he had, the social rejection, the alienation that he suffers socially as well as existentially and his alienation is very important.

It is to connect the idea of alienation to the idea of reification or commodification. The reason for using the Marxist terms in a very conceptual way is because the whole idea of reification is a process for which an entity or an individual becomes a commodity. Septimus's reification had occurred true repression. The fact is that he was trained not to emote and that was part of his emotional training before he went to the war.

The physical training of being a soldier, there is also this very emotional training of clinically detaching yourself from all kinds of emotional responses. There is a character of Evans in the story and when read about him; it is decoded that Septimus's relationship with Evans is very complex. There is a very subtle hint that they may have been lovers and may have become romantic.

They may have had a homoerotic relationship, but in any case, they had a very strong bond, a strong relationship, strong connection; maybe as friends, maybe as lovers, we do not quite know. It is not spelled out, it is left hanging. But there is a lot of hints dropped in terms of Septimus's relationship with Evans. Now we come to know that when Evans died in the war and he died of a bomb explosion.

Septimus did not cry. Septimus did not react. Septimus did not emote because he had so thoroughly and clinically internalized the idea of emotionlessness as part of his military masculinity that he thought emoting is something which is an expression of weakness, an

expression of breakdown, expression of agencylessness. The constant indoctrination, the constant internalization of this kind of military masculinity compromises, genetically compromises, and emotionally.

In other words, to use a great colloquial term that disturbs his senses, it completely disorients him. Hence, when he comes back from the war, he is unable to emote, unable to feel; his control over his emotions is completely gone, has become non-existent, and is completely compromised. So, either he is over-emoting or he is unable to emote.

The normal emotional equilibrium that Septimus used to have or that has just completely disappeared and that comes with the training, the military training. People who are interested in this kind of relationship between emotion, trauma and military masculinity and all kinds of extreme forms of masculinity and even if one takes a look at some popular culture today one will find that this detachment from emotion.

This clinical systematic training of being emotionless that is provided even in popular culture today. For example, if one takes a look at the Bourne series, the “Bourne Legacy” films or even the spin-off from that there is a spin-off in the Amazon Prime called “Treadstone” even there one finds that one of the pieces of trainings that these people receive in a dystopian world is the ability to be emotionless, the ability to be clinical killers, to kill other people without any empathy.

It is the complete annihilation of empathy, the systematic annihilation of empathy that comes with training is talked. When the training and the extreme war situation goes away, the soldiers come back to the civilian space and are expected to empathize, receive and enact sympathy. But that is not possible. They realize the problem with Septimus because his ability to empathize is completely gone.

His ability to connect emotionally in a balanced way is completely gone and on top of that he suffers from emotionlessness, he suffers from a lack of empathy from his doctors are also trained medically in the profession to have a clinical detachment from the patients, the human

subject. In other words, the entire novel may be seen as a crisis in humanity, the crisis in the human connect, the human inter-subjective connect.

There is no inter-subjective economy. Each subject exists on a different island and each one fails to connect to the other person and not just Septimus, you take a look at Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh everyone and all the characters in the novel all seemed to be exhibiting or inhabiting different points in space which are not connected.

The metropolis of London becomes essentially is very complex chronotope and using a word chronotope in an abactinal way, a chrono and topes, chrono is time topes is space, the topography, so the space-time. The complex space-time of London is a space-time of disintegration. Everyone is different from everyone else. Everyone is disintegrated from everyone else and the degree of disconnect and disintegration is something that typically informs post-war London.

The novel is looked at culturally, historically, materially, medically as an example of extreme alienation and we should not just look at this from the perspective of masculinity studies because if we take a look at for example Septimus's wife Lucrezia she is an Italian woman, an outsider to London linguistically, culturally, also politically very much an outsider.

She comes back to London and she is hoping to be a part of London through her husband who is notionally an Englishman, a British person but then he suffers disintegration as well, he cannot connect, he cannot recognize it is London. This is a new city, a strange city for him. There seems to be some kind of a paradigm shift or rather a cognitive shift, a tectonic shift in cognition across the novel.

Lucrezia is an outsider, Septimus is an outsider, so all the series of disconnects is something that a novel piles on top of the other and interestingly none of these characters meet. Septimus and Clarissa never meet but then Clarissa sees an ambulance that takes Septimus away. There is the crisscross spatially speaking and it is a complex space because the entire novel takes place in one day. It is a very typically Modernist temporal frame.

It all happens in one day, one calendar day, one clock time that is shared by everyone. The idea of clock time is very symbolically and iconically present in the construct of Big Ben or the giant tower clock of London that keeps charming out the sounds. It is the distributive shared time by everyone, but then that becomes a secondary time, the primary time of the novel is the time which is psychological in quality.

The psychological situation of time where people are situated psychologically they go back and across time. This idea of one-day temporal structure, the very superficial structure and it is very deliberately superficial because what Woolf is trying to do is to tease out the different temporal possibilities in a novel where each character is inhabiting a different timescape.

A different time zone which is theoretically connected by Big Ben, theoretically connected by one calendar day but it is a very complex division of time and that is something which we see throughout the novel. To sum up, the novel should be looked into, not just medically but existentially and politically as well. It is a profoundly political novel and it is one of those novels which look at the collusion between patriarchy and medicine, between masculinity and medicine.

The two doctors in the novel Holmes and Bradshaw embody the empirical gaze, the empirical quantifying gaze which looks at every human subject as a case study, as a commodity that can be analyzed and classified and are read and coded and that is completely empathyless and the empathylessness of the novel should tap into as one reckon the novel ends with Septimus's suicide.

The day comes to an end, Clarissa Dalloway throws a party where everyone comes but no one connects to anyone. There is a big massive drama of alienation, a massive drama of disintegration and that undercuts at a very superficial a speedy metropolis in the end that is London in a post-war scenario where it is trying very hard to look speedy, to look celebratory.

The toffee advertising aeroplane, the skywriting aeroplane that was advertising for some toffee. It is shown how a skywriting aeroplane is a wonderful machine and that itself carries

the spectral presence of the war because then people tend to freeze when they look at the aeroplane in the sky because of the memory of being bombed.

The memory of the association between aeroplane and violence is still fresh in people's minds and that degree of association is something which is seen happening quite often in the novel to Septimus. It becomes a very de-familiarized machine and to see how the whole idea, the whole absorption of Septimus to the entire machine movement is depicted as readers to a very deliberate defamiliarizing style, everything is de-familiarized or decelerated as well.

It is much delayed decoding something which we see in Joseph Conrad as well. He manages to decode it much later and the delay is even at the narrative level, even the narrative delays it for us. The words slow down, the sound slows down, the recognition slows down, the cognition slows down, and everything slows down. There is a systematic slowdown of cognition which the novel captures narratively speaking.

The entanglement between narration and cognition, where Septimus is reading of the skywriting aeroplane K R; he reads it very slowly. It is how his mind is processing it because his mind is hurt, it is injured, it is bruised mind, and it is a traumatized mind. It cannot process anything quickly and its lack of an immediate connect is something which is there in that particular scene.

And as we mentioned even the average Londoner there is a degree of frozenness the moment to see an aeroplane in the sky and it is a very deliberate symbol that Woolf is using because this aeroplane seems to be a departure. It is supposed to be a departure from the bombing aeroplane, the violent aeroplane because this is advertising for toffee and it is advertising for a commodity which is meant to be consumed but what gets consumed in the process is also a very spectral trauma.

In other words, the novel, the landscape of the novel is slightly traumatophilic. There is a consumption of trauma that is happening all the time, it is never quite away and Septimus is like a zombie and trauma is left over from the traumatic landscape, is a misfit, a massive

spectacular misfit in this world. It is trying very hard to move on from its traumatic background, from this traumatic past.

This is a theoretical frame in terms of how we should be looking at the novel.