

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 27

Mrs Dalloway: Author Background & Context

Hello learners and welcome to another lecture of this NPTEL course on “The English novel Interdisciplinary Approaches”. Today we will begin our discussion of a novel that was published in the 20th century. So, we have moved from the 19th to the 20th century and we will be moving closer to our contemporary time with this novel. The novel that I will begin discussing today is *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

Before I actually begin reading and discussing the novel itself, I want to introduce a very important historical event and I want to talk a little bit about how that historical event exerts a great deal of interpretive as well as material influence on the writing as well as the reading of this novel. The event that I am referring to is the influenza pandemic that raged from the year 1918 to 1919. Some of you may have heard of this pandemic, the influenza pandemic, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which raged from the years 2020 to 2022. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, this one, the influenza pandemic, was in recent memory and in historical record among the most devastating pandemics of the human civilization.

This pandemic was a great and catastrophic event in the lives of writers such as Virginia Woolf. I will talk a little bit about how it can help us better understand the novel that we will read, that is *Mrs. Dalloway*. Now, it is widely known that the pandemic was a great killer. It killed more human beings than many great world wars, and this is an important fact to note because in the year 1918, most of Europe was relieved and celebrating the end of the First Great War, i.e. World War I and yet it is also important to note that while most of Europe was celebrating the end of the Great War, the events that were unfolding as the war had ended, that is the pandemic which was raging after the war ended, actually killed many, many more human beings than the war itself did. To take just one example and estimate, in the United States alone, more people died in this influenza pandemic than died in six of the nation's wars combined, i.e. the two world wars and then the military occupations in Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea and Iraq. Despite this great disparity in the

number of lives lost and this matter-of-fact reality of the war as a great killer, and therefore as something that would naturally deserve a great deal of human attention. Despite these numbers, that is to say, the pandemic has not attracted a proportionate amount of attention from both writers as well as scholars and interpreters of the human past. That is now changing and we have the COVID-19 pandemic to thank for that change. But nonetheless, at the time that Virginia Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway*, this change had not yet occurred. Therefore, it was possible to feel that writers and individuals generally were living in a sort of intellectual vacuum. That is to say, even though writers like Woolf felt that this was a great event, it was a great human event about which writers, intellectuals, historians and anyone who had any capacity to think and rationally process event, could not but choose to write about it. Despite the sense that everyone should be writing about the pandemic and thinking about the pandemic, the writing that was published in that time did not seem to reflect the sense of urgency.

Now, I'll reflect briefly on the biography of the novelist Virginia Woolf, and I will highlight how she lived through and was deeply shaped by the influenza pandemic. This is going to be a very selective biographical review of Virginia Woolf because I will not be referring to all life events which might be relevant for the understanding of this novel, but only those life events which had to do directly with the influenza pandemic. Now, we know from her diary entries that she recorded events as they were unfolding. So, in July 1918, Virginia Woolf writes in her diary that influenza rages all over the place, and a week later, she writes that there has been a funeral next door and someone has died of influenza. So, this is in July 1918, and this is associated with being having occurred during the first wave of the influenza pandemic. Later, in October of the same year, that is October 1918, Virginia Woolf writes, "We are, by the way, in the midst of a plague, unmatched since the Black Death, according to *The Times*. She's referring to the newspaper published from London *The Times*."

According to *The Times*, "who seem to tremble, lest it may seize upon Lord Northcliffe, and thus precipitate us into peace". Now, in this sentence, you can see that the pandemic is providing an occasion for some kind of satire, some kind of humour, and some kind of an intellectual joke. What is the nature of this intellectual joke? The nature of this joke is that *The Times* is trembling that the pandemic might produce peace. Why is *The Times* trembling?

The Times, it might appear from Virginia Woolf's perspective, is a conservative newspaper and they have some sort of an interest in prolonging the war. And they are therefore

concerned that the pandemic might produce sort of a very early peace, that it might end the war before or earlier than it should logically and politically have ended. Additionally, Woolf also notes that given the number of deaths and given the amount of suffering and devastation that is spreading, it can be said that the influenza pandemic has been the worst form of mass suffering since the Black Death, and this is a reference to the bubonic plague. So, we can see that here is a novelist who is observing very accurately and with some discomfort the widespread public devastation that this pandemic is causing around her.

Now, in addition to being a chronicler of the public devastation that the pandemic was producing, Virginia Woolf was also a private sufferer. She was in fact a serial sufferer. She was infected with this influenza virus multiple times and suffered a great deal. I have listed the number of times and roughly the time period during which Virginia Woolf suffered from the flu and I'll briefly go over them.

In April 1916, she had her first experience of the flu and then subsequently in March 1918, when she was confined to her bed for eight days. And at that time, she describes this time by saying that she was divorced from her pen, and due to this kind of a divorce, she felt that the whole current of her life had been cut off. Later in March, in late 1919, towards the end of the year, she was infected again. She suffered again. She was down with the flu. And this was a strain that was circulating all over the world. So, this was the pandemic strain of the flu. She writes later that she thought she was dying, but her doctor informed her that it was only the nerves of the heart that go wrong after influenza.

Later, after the pandemic so-called had subsided, in 1922 again, she contracted the flu and described her pulse rate as fluctuating and her heart again seemed to be affected again. As a result of this infection, she was disabled and unable to write for a month. Finally, as if these weren't enough, she suffered additional bouts of influenza in 1923 and 1925. So, you can see that Virginia Woolf was not just a writer who lived through a time in which the influenza pandemic caused a great deal of suffering, but she suffered herself a great deal. And the sheer number of times she contracted the virus and came very near, very painful experience and almost a near-death experience means that the pandemic was not just a historical event, but a lived reality for this writer. Now, perhaps influenced by these repeated bouts of sickness and by observing how this kind of sickness was represented or not represented adequately enough, in the year 1925, Virginia Woolf published an essay titled *On Being Ill*. This was published in the journal *New Criterion*, which was edited by T.S. Eliot. Immediately before that, in the year before she published *On Being Ill*, she had published *Mrs. Dalloway* in May 1925. She had suffered many forms of illness by this

time, which included the bouts of influenza, which I listed in the previous slide. In addition, she had also recently fainted at one of her sister's parties. So you can see that in the year 1926, when Virginia Woolf writes this essay *On Being Ill*, she was a writer who had suffered a great deal, who was in a position to reflect on the meaning of illness and was also in a position as a writer and someone who was conscious of what others were reading, writing and publishing in that time.

She was in a position to reflect why people wrote in a certain way about illness and what could be done to improve those ways of writing and thinking. Now, I will first provide a very general summary of the claim that Woolf makes in this essay, *On Being Ill*, and then read some quotes to substantiate Woolf's claims, which I believe are very powerful and important for us as we try and understand the novel. So, in summary, the key claim that Virginia Woolf makes is that illness is not represented adequately enough in modern literature. The statement needs to be understood.

What Woolf is claiming is not that people don't fall sick in the fictional worlds of novels and poems and so on, or that poets don't describe experiences of falling ill, etc., etc. This is not the claim that Woolf is making. Woolf's claim is a little more specific and to understand that we need to qualify the statement that there is a lack of substantial literary writing about illness. What Woolf means about when she says that there is a lack of substantial literary writing, what she means is that illness has been represented as an isolated and an exceptional event that occurs in a life which is normally characterised by well-being and good health. This is a problem. This is a gap. This is a shortcoming. This is not an adequate representation of illness. What really is needed, according to Woolf, is a sense of how being ill provides human beings with a different perspective.

Being ill enables writers, individuals and literally any human being who is experiencing a form of illness to perceive the world with a heightened sensibility. Now, the perspective of the ill body is what is missing from modern literature. What is this perspective and why is it missing? So, first Woolf will describe what this perspective is and then she will describe why it is missing. She isn't making this critique from an ivory tower.

It's not that she considers herself as better or more intelligent or more capable than her audience. She's quite sympathetic to the efforts of writers and readers, and therefore she rationalizes and explains why it is but natural that there would be this lack or gap in modern literature. So, I will now read from the essay *On Being Ill*: Virginia Woolf writes, and I quote, "Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual changes that it

brings, how astonishing when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the acts of sickness how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and weak thinking to find ourselves in the presence of angels. When we think of this, and infinitely more, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature”.

So, the claim being made has two parts; The first part is a description of the psychological turbulence. The psychological experience and the power of that experience and the transformation that that experience brings about when a human being falls ill and recovers. This is something that the author wants to put on record and describe for everyone. It is not that the author assumes that readers are unaware of this. Rather, the author would like to remind readers of the great psychologically overwhelming nature of the experience of falling ill and recovering from that illness. It might seem like a very small thing, a very simple thing. And why does it feel small or simple? Because a slight attack of influenza, we cannot know when we might contract the virus, how the virus might enter our system and make us ill. A little rise of temperature, merely one to two degrees of increase in the bodily temperature of human beings can produce a great deal of physical and mental discomfort.

So, these might appear to be small things, the chemical imbalances in our bodies that produce sickness. They are small things, but they produce such profound and such transformative psychological changes. They make us dream. They make us perceive different realities. We are transported into different realms, undiscovered countries. There's a great deal of spatial metaphors in the first half of this passage. We enter a different world when we are sick, and then when we recover, we emerge from that world, and our re-entry into the normal world in which we live when we are healthy, that re-entry has the power of entering an angelic universe. And she describes this angelic universe as in the presence of angels.

So, our re-entry into the life of health is also as profound and as transformative as our exit from this world into the world of sickness. So, if this is such a profound experience, and if this is so common to every human being, then why is it not the chief theme? Why is it not

the primary theme of literature? And why are themes like love, battle and jealousy, the prime themes of literature?

This is the problem that the narrator of Virginia Woolf's essay identifies, and as a way to respond to this problem, Woolf calls on writers to produce literature which would address this gap. Literature like novels about influenza or epic poems to typhoid. The second reference, epic poems to typhoid, recalls a personal tragedy. Virginia's brother Toby had died of typhoid in the year 1906.

So, while the narrator feels natural to claim, to call on writers to produce these kinds of writing, the narrator also acknowledges that one cannot simply decide to produce this literature. One cannot simply choose and write literature of illness. It is a very difficult thing to do because in order to produce a literature of illness, one would require a new philosophy. One would require a new mode of perceiving the world. The world needs to be understood from the perspective of the body. This is a very difficult thing to do and this is exactly what the narrator describes in the next passage. Woolf writes, and I quote, "Those great wars which the body wages by itself, with the mind a slave to it, in the solitude of the bedroom, against the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia, are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion-tamer; a robust philosophy, a reason rooted in the bowels of the earth".

We can see that in order to produce a literature which would be truly honest, which would do justice to the profound psychological, physical and mental transformations that illness and recovery produces in human beings. In order to do that would require almost a superhuman intellectual effort. It would require a reason that was rooted in the bowels of the earth. The bowels of the earth are a very key phrase because it combines both the materiality of the world in which we live as well as the materiality of the individual human bodies that we inhabit. In order to write a literature that was true to the experience of illness and recovery, writers would need to understand something fundamental about the human body, but they would also need to integrate this fundamental truth of the human body with another truth, something wider, deeper, older, and much more complex and much more indifferent to the human body, which is the natural world in which the body exists. Now, even if a writer were to accomplish this intellectual labour, the audience, that is to say, the market of readers buying books, would find it difficult to appreciate and accept this literature. Woolf writes further, "More practically speaking, the public would say a novel devoted to influenza lacked plot. They would complain that there was no love in it". Finally, among the drawbacks of illness as a matter for literature, there's the poverty of the

language. English has no words for the shiver and the headache. Language at once runs dry. There's nothing ready-made for the sufferer. He is forced to coin words himself, and taking his pain in one hand and a lump of pure sound in the other, so to crush them together that a brand-new word in the end drops out.

In this very powerful and moving passage, and ultimately very honest reflection on the experience of being ill, Woolf acknowledges how language itself reaches its limits when it is asked to describe illness. And Woolf explains further, "The experience cannot be imparted, and as is always the way with these dumb things, the ill person's own suffering serves but to wake memories in his friends' minds of their influences, their aches and pains which went unwept last February and now cry out desperately, clamorously for the divine relief of sympathy". So, we see the insight being offered in this long passage about the difficulty of describing illness is that it emerges from a paradoxical nature of suffering itself.

What is the paradox? The paradox is that suffering is both at the same time, both deeply personal and widely public. And these two forms, these two senses are both true at the same time and therefore it presents an insurmountable problem to the writer who would like to produce a literary account of suffering. Every person who falls sick, suffers, experiences the psychological turbulence and ultimately recovers. Every person, however, when he or she reads an account of suffering and recovery is likely to find differences and is likely to go into a competitive mode of comparing and contrasting their experience with the experience of the writer or the sick person or the patient that is being described on the page in front of them. It is both natural and at the same time unfair to engage in such comparisons. But Woolf's profound empathy in this moment is to acknowledge that every person has a right to claim in what they read that they too have a story to tell. So, if everyone's story of suffering is different and unique, how can there be some objective criteria?

How can there be some objective grounds for creating, producing and appreciating literature that speaks to the universality of this experience? Further, if these problems weren't enough, the Great War makes illness even harder to perceive. As the war ended, people were tired and were too demoralized and too much in despair at hearing stories of death and suffering. As a result, when the war ended, people needed to exert an intellectual effort, almost a cerebral effort to turn away from death and suffering. The pandemic, which was less visible than war, thus appeared to be almost too convenient for a public which was suffering from the sheer exhaustion of grief.

They had grown tired of grieving and they were hungry for some reasons to celebrate. And therefore, the pandemic arrived at a very ironic and strange time when it gave people who were hungry to celebrate a silent form of suffering. Therefore, some people could suffer in private, while the public itself, because it wanted to celebrate, could turn its gaze away from such silent and private suffering. Finally, Woolf ends her reflection on this lack of a literature of illness by talking about the intellectual insights and the power that ill persons or people who are disabled and unable to function normally, that the patient gets a unique kind of psychological and intellectual insight and Woolf ends by describing this insight and giving a sense of how we can find beauty and solace in the midst of suffering and pain. Woolf writes, "As the invalid stares up at the sky, he or she can see that nature is both divinely beautiful and divinely heartless. It is only the recumbent who know what, after all, nature is at no pains to conceal, that she in the end will conquer. The heat will leave the world and all life will be wiped out".

Nature's very indifference is what is comforting in this vision. Individual bodily suffering and the agonies of real and metaphoric hearts are replaced by something that is beautiful because it is heartless. Now, if one thinks about it, this is an extremely cynical and despairing way to look at the world. However, if one looks at it from the perspective that is larger, that is wider and much more objective than the perspective of an individual patient who is undergoing suffering and who is sick, then in this vision we can find cause for hope.

On this note, I will end this introduction and this reflection on idleness and forms of writing and in the subsequent lecture, I will introduce the novel by reading the opening passages of the novel and I will carry these thoughts and we will see how these reflections on why idleness is not represented in literature and how it can be represented in literature guide Woolf's writing in *Mrs. Dalloway*. And we will further understand how *On Being Ill*, it is not just an intellectual document, it is not just a comment on the history of literature or an understanding of why people cannot write about illness. But it was also, in a very coded manner, providing Woolf's readers with the means and the proper manner in which they could understand and appreciate the novel that she had published a few months ago, that is *Mrs. Dalloway*. Thank you!