

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
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Lecture - 31
Mrs Dalloway: Intertextual Connections - I

Hello, learners, and welcome back to our continuing discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf. To briefly recall the ideas and thoughts discussed so far, we've been trying to arrive at an understanding of the unique stylistic, emotional and intellectual registers that the novel has been creating for us and the novel has been training us, its readers, in the best way to inhabit. And the goal behind creating these emotional registers and training us in these ways of seeing is to enable us to ultimately perceive a wide diversity of human experience. And this diversity I described in the previous lectures is marked by the different social, biological, human, cultural, occupational facts and differences that Clarissa and Septimus occupy.

In order to get a sense of how Virginia Woolf has created a style of perceiving the world, which is true to the experience of the pandemic, as well as the war, I'm going to read a long passage from that section in the beginning of the novel which describes Clarissa walking down Bond Street and witnessing a lot of shopping, business activity and in general everyday life in Westminster, London. This passage begins thus:

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? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home;...part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.

Now, this passage describes both extremes of this emotional register. On one hand, the certainty that death exists, that death is not a distant, inevitable fate as it is for all human beings, but rather living in the early 20th century in London, death was a far more immediate and present danger. There is that sense that everything that's pleasurable will end. Clarissa's response to this clear and present and imminent fact of death is twofold. On the one hand, Clarissa treats this fact of death as a source of comfort. The narrator

eventually acquiesces and speaks on behalf of Clarissa and tells us, that it was a form of consolation. The absolute end that death promised consoled something, consoled a part of Clarissa. This is one part of Clarissa's response to the certainty of death. What is the other?

If this is a somewhat despairing and cynical response, there is another part of Clarissa's response which is quite optimistic. And if not optimistic, full of hope. In this response, Clarissa says, looks at death not as an end but as something like a beginning. What is beginning when Clarissa or individual human lives end? A sort of connection. This connection is what Clarissa is referring to when she thinks of these images of a mist, the branches of trees and there's a sense of connection between the physical existence of human beings in a natural world. So, the individual who walks down Bond Street and who delights in grocery shops and all the physical and material comforts, that individual will die. In fact, that individual life is extremely short-lived. But the death of that individual is the beginning, the continuation and the creation of a network between that individual and other forms of life, vitality and other forms of growth around her. Clarissa becomes more conscious of her connection to other forms of life through this awareness that her bodily existence is very short-lived. How does she describe the beginning or the possibility of these other connections with other forms of life which are inaugurated through the end and the cessation of her bodily existence? She describes this possibility through the image of a mist. That just like in a mist, we cannot see exactly where the branches of one tree end and the branch of another tree begins. Just like this mist hides connections, so the experience of falling ill and possibly dying prematurely even. Lives brutally cut short by infection, by the pandemic. This kind of an end can be likened to the spread of a mist which hides the branches of trees. And according to Clarissa, this mist is the sign of hope, that she describes and imagines herself as inhabiting the natural world, a little bit like the mist inhabits the world along with the trees. So just as the branches of trees carry the mist and allow the mist to connect these branches to others. She becomes herself like a sort of mist. This metaphor is used in multiple ways and the narrator is very sensitive and generous at the same time to ensure that the boundaries of this metaphor are not specified. It is kept open-ended. So, if you read the sentences carefully, Clarissa imagines dying but living on through her connection to other people, through her connection to trees as well. And she describes her relationship to the people she knows best as the trees on whose branches the mist rests. So, the people, for instance, that she's going to host at her home later that evening, are like those branches who survive. And if she were indeed to die a little prematurely, if she were indeed to be taken by the pandemic, she would become like the mist. And the people she had hosted at her home that evening would become like the branches of trees.

So, this is one metaphor which speaks to Clarissa's awareness of how deeply embedded human life is in other forms of existence and this is even more telling because this awareness comes to Clarissa when she is not in a forest or a very rugged terrain, but rather she is in the midst of high civilization. She is walking down Westminster, which is very close to Parliament. She has just seen or heard or rumored a car in which the Prime Minister was traveling and in the midst of this cultural institution, she thinks of herself as being embedded in nature. Now, this sense that while one is a human being, one is also a part of nature, pervades the novel and informs both the narrator's description of Clarissa as well as the way in which we perceive Septimus.

Now, immediately after this walk, Clarissa goes home and inhabits a particular space, which is the sick room. As she is about to enter the sick room, this is how the narrator describes Clarissa.

She began to go slowly upstairs with her hand on the banisters, as if she had left a party, where now this friend now that had flashed back her face, her voice; had shut the door and gone out and stood alone, a single figure against the appalling night or rather, to be accurate, against the stare of this matter-of-fact June morning; soft with the glow of rose petals for some, she knew, and felt it, as she paused by the open staircase window which let in blinds flapping, dogs barking, let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her.

Just before Clarissa reaches home and makes her way up to this sick room, she has received information that she was not invited to a particular social gathering and that realisation that she was left out of a certain list or a certain group of people, causes some discomfort to Clarissa. At the same time though, Clarissa is contrasting that social shortcoming or social insult with the natural world, with mortality that is far more important but doesn't feel as urgent as social validation. There is one contrast that this passage is raising between the validation that a certain individual can give us and the larger, more long-term reckoning with fate that awaits all of us given our mortal existence. Again, we have reference to this sense of bodily effacement which we have come across several times earlier and this will become a refrain throughout this novel that Clarissa will continue to feel repeatedly and at regular intervals the effacement of her bodily existence. She continues to have the sensation that for some reason she is constantly in the process of becoming immaterial. She is

constantly in the process of turning less solid, less tangible and more ethereal or more spiritual. It might appear to be an intellectual or philosophical matter that Clarissa has these thoughts because of the intensity or the power of her intellectual activity. However, a more accurate reading of these repeated sensations, these repeated feelings that even though her body appeared and felt to have a physical weight of its own, she was beginning to feel increasingly less and less material. A more accurate reading of this sense is that this was a lingering and very long-lasting after-effect of the influenza pandemic. As we will see shortly, a great deal of psychological research was conducted in the 1920s on the effects and specifically on the neurological impact of the influenza pandemic on the human body. Virginia Woolf, as we have seen, did not need to read the results of this research to understand how deeply the influenza could impact the nervous system because her doctors had repeatedly told her how weak the nerves had become in her body, how she had several problems with her heart rate. She had multiple forms of arrhythmia and had come very near to having strokes and heart attacks, mainly because her nervous system was thrown out of order because of repeated bouts with influenza, as well as a host of other physical and mental health issues. So, all that experience and knowledge is reflected in Clarissa's sense repeatedly that she is becoming more spirit and less matter.

To understand how deeply the influenza pandemic influenced the art and intellectual production of early 20th century Europe I want to reflect briefly on this painting. This painting is titled *Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu*. It was produced with oil on canvas in the year 1919. It is by the Norwegian painter, Edvard Munch, who is very well known and probably most well known for his painting, *The Scream*. Edvard Munch, like almost every other recognizable artistic and intellectual figure in 20th century Europe, had a brush with influenza. Like Virginia Woolf, Edvard Munch was another artist who came very close to losing his life as a result of contracting the influenza. In this painting, we can see several things, but the two things that I would like to note are first that the face, the face of the figure in the painting is highly vague. We don't see the eyes and we barely see the nose and the mouth.

So, the distinguishing features of this individual, which is the human face is perhaps the most expressive and the most perceptive, the most revelatory feature of the human body and the earliest painting, photography, films, and really, any form of visual expression has been obsessed with the human face. It is even more remarkable that in this painting, which is titled *Self-Portrait*, it is an artist's description of his own experience of the influenza pandemic. So, it is even more telling that this self-portrait has the least amount of detail,

least amount of clarity on the distinguishing feature of the human body which is the face. And why is that so? It may be so for two reasons. On one hand, the message that this undistinguished face conveys is that there is nothing unique about an individual's experience of suffering and suffering a viral or an influenza infection. The symptoms are the same for everyone. There's nothing unique or there's nothing that Edwin Munch as an individual can offer or can contribute to an understanding of what happens when someone is infected with influenza.

Another idea is that in the experience of the patient as well as the artist and the painter, there is something very dematerializing. There is something about the experience of being sick which makes the individual, patient as well as painter, feel that they are becoming less real, that they are turning into something very ideational, something which is a matter of spirit and less a matter of solid flesh or material flesh. Now, the second thing we must note about this painting is the unmade bed in the background, which signifies the most common experience of being sick with the flu, which is that one is in a great deal of physical discomfort. One is tossing and turning, as the expression goes, in bed, trying to find a comfortable position, but often struggling to do so. Because one is frequently in a supine or bedridden state, it becomes pointless to keep making and unmaking the bed. So, the unmade bed describes this very universal condition of being sick. Edvard Munch is unique because he painted another self-portrait immediately after recovering from the influenza. And this is what you see on your screen right now. This is titled *Self-Portrait After Spanish Influenza*. And it will be interesting to note the differences between these two self-portraits. Now, the first thing to note in this self-portrait is that the face is realized. There is a great deal of detail on the face of this portrait. However, if one sees closely, one can see that the face is extremely pale and hollow. Even though there is detail, it's almost as if the person in the picture has seen a ghost. And it is this ghostly nature of life after recovering from influenza that we will find reflected in almost every page of Mrs. Dalloway.

Now, before going further, and I have already introduced the character of Septimus, but before we go further, I will need to clarify the relationship between three things, that is mental health, the pandemic and the war. These three form a very important cluster of ideas. You could almost say that they form the central intellectual triangle within which the novel can be best interpreted.

Firstly, we need to understand the deep relationships between the pandemic and mental health. I mentioned that there was a great deal of research on the impact of the influenza infection on the nervous system of the patients. This research began to be published as

early as the year 1919 from hospitals and mental health asylums in the United States. Now, beginning with that research, a great deal of subsequent studies were done and the general takeaway from almost four or five decades of research, clinical observations, as well as analysis in labs based on the behavior of patients who had the influenza. The general takeaway of that was that influenza unleashed a wide range of severely debilitating mental health problems on the patients who contracted this virus. The first doctor summarized these symptoms into four categories. They were delirium, dementia praecox, which is known as schizophrenia today, depression and suicidal tendencies. Depression and suicidal tendencies sometimes manifested in a great deal of violent behaviour, and the kind of violence that patients displayed towards their own family members, towards their own friends, and towards people with whom they had otherwise no reason to be violent. This was the observation of several psychologists, and this was also the observation of Virginia Woolf's own doctor who continuously advised her to be careful of her heart because her repeated infections from influenza had left her nervous system and especially the nervous system around her heart extremely weakened and in great danger of collapsing.

Secondly, we also need to understand that there was also a very deep relationship between the First World War and mental health issues. The soldiers who experienced violence, fighting, injury, disability, and in general, all forms of trauma, and return to England and to Europe were described as having survived the experience of something which was called shell shock. This was a term that was popular in Virginia Woolf's time, to describe the symptoms that a lot of young men who returned from war manifested. These symptoms included hallucinations, they included inability to sleep, they included a lot of trembling, a lot of tremors and they also included a great and disabling degree of fear. So, a lot of these young men were constantly in fear of their lives. They felt that their lives were in danger and they reacted with a great deal of anxiety and fear to harmless and everyday circumstances. It was much later in the 20th century that there was an effort to study all of these tremors and to treat them and to study them in one combined intellectual effort. In the middle of the 20th century, the American Psychological Association coined this term PTSD, named Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. So, this was a recognition that allowed for all of the trauma and psychological impact of the war to be treated as a psychological disability and not just as a personal reaction. In early 20th century England, in the time that Virginia Woolf is describing in *Mrs. Dalloway*, it was frequently thought that young men who exhibited manifestations of shell shock were just lazy or cowardly. And there were even many instances of soldiers and young men being punished, being punished for displaying symptoms of shell shock. They were punished with financial consequences.

Some were even executed. And some were even subjected to forms of physical violence. We can see how a lack of understanding of what trauma is and how trauma manifests itself in the human body led to a great deal of suffering. Not only did it mean that a lot of soldiers were not treated, but it also meant that soldiers who in fact needed help were subjected to further punishment. So, all in all, it was an extremely unfortunate and tragic situation.

To understand exactly how we can see this reflected in the characters in the novel, we will witness how Septimus behaves and how Septimus reacts to normal or so-called harmless everyday situations. We have already seen that Septimus and his wife Lucrezia are crossing the street in the same neighborhood of London while Clarissa is walking and in general preparing to host people at her home. Soon after we witness Clarissa retired to her sick room, we witness a scene in a park where Lucrezia has taken Septimus and has been trying with not much success to get Septimus to enjoy a little bit of the wonderful, sunny, clear day in the heart of London.

And we will continue understanding what happens and how these two individuals are locked in a somewhat unending struggle for recognition and to elevate some of their mutual pain in the next lecture. Thank you.