

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches
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Lecture - 33
Mrs. Dalloway: Intertextual Connections - II

Hello learners and welcome to our continuing discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf.

I had introduced the difficult and almost traumatic state of Septimus's mind in the previous lecture in which we had a very vivid insight into the kind of hallucinatory mental processes that Septimus was constantly dealing with. We saw an image of Septimus flitting from one image to another while sitting on that bench in Regent's Park. Completely unable to enjoy the beauties and the pleasantness of nature all around them, and trapped in thoughts of despair, thoughts of fear, and constantly recreating experiences from the First World War. We also saw what the name Evans means to Septimus and I speculated that Evans was someone who fought with Septimus in the war but who unlike Septimus did not survive. And like Evans, there are many others who have died. And it is the collective grief, as well as the particular grief, that Septimus carries, as well as the guilt of having survived, having lived, which doesn't let go, which traps Septimus in the past. And makes Septimus completely unable to partake in the normal functioning of life, which in turn makes life much more difficult for Rezia as well. We got a hint of all this and we will gain more detail and more specificity about this experience in the subsequent sections that we will read.

In order to better understand the mental health issues that were unleashed by experience of serving in the World War, I want to read briefly two poems by two poets who are among the most well-known war poets of England, that is Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

Sassoon is an important figure for anyone trying to understand *Mrs. Dalloway* because Virginia Woolf spent a lot of time talking to Sassoon, trying to understand the psychological impact of serving in the war. And most of what Woolf writes about Septimus was drawn from her experience of listening to and talking with Siegfried Sassoon, who served in the World War and wrote a lot of poetry as well as prose, but most importantly, poetry, haunting and resonant poems about war and the effect that the war had on young men who returned to England alive and without any obvious or visible disabilities, but utterly disabled intellectually. So that was Sassoon and that is the relevance of Sassoon for

this novel. The poem that I'm going to read by Sassoon is 'Repression of War Experience.'
Here it goes:

Now light the candles; one; two; there's moth;
What silly beggars they are to blunder in
And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame-
No, no, not that-- it's bad to think of war
When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you;
And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
That drive them out to jabber among the trees.
Now, the key thing to note here is the trees.

We will soon see how important the site and the image of trees is for Septimus. Septimus is obsessed with trees. Septimus is deeply embedded in the tactile and sensory pleasures that nature offers and There's a stark difference between the way Septimus notices and recognizes the beauties of nature and the way everyone else around him seems to enjoy being in nature. Septimus uses nature as an occasion and as a space to lose himself, to get distracted and find his thoughts, return him to the experience of being on the killing fields.

Another thing to note is the idea of gagging. To gag is to prevent oneself from breathing, to stuff one's mouth or nose with something, and generally to bring oneself to a point of painful suffocation and asphyxiation. So here the poet says that, that the poet has gagged thoughts of war all day, and there's a sense of failure, there's a sense of exhaustion, and there's a sense of resignation as if the poet has refused to continue doing this very unpleasant, maybe necessary, but ultimately highly unpleasant thing of suppressing these thoughts. And then there's also an ironic reference to madness and soldiers. The poet says, soldiers don't go mad unless they lose control of ugly thoughts. Now this thought has been proved. Who has proved them? The experts of the time, doctors, medical practitioners, people who seem to know about these things. But it is clear that they don't actually know what they should know or they don't have the empathy or the ability to truly understand what is going on. It is not that once they keep the thoughts under control that the soldiers can be completely normal. As we've just seen, the effort to control these ugly thoughts is like a kind of suffocation. It's a kind of gagging, as if one is about to go out of breath and suffocate. Let us go on:

Now light your pipe; look what a steady hand.

Draw a deep breath; stop thinking; count fifteen,
And you're as right as rain...
Why won't it rain?...I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
With bucketsfull of water to sluice the dark
And make the roses hang their dripping heads.

So what a steady hand. There's a reference to tremors. Many soldiers who returned from World War I couldn't keep still. They always trembled, shivered and couldn't function. This was described as shell shock at the time, but has later been identified as PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorder. Now, in this line, the poet says, now light your pipe, look what a steady hand. The idea is that while lighting the pipe, the poet's hand is not shivering and the poet seizes and pounces upon this sight of his hand being steady as a dramatic proof that things are normal. But the tone of this line makes it very clear that this is an exception and not the norm. And this is the exception that actually confirms and affirms the norm, which is that the hand is never steady. It is steady now and it is one of very rare occasion that the hand is steady. And the irony also goes to how people are unwilling to recognize how deep the problem is. So just because in this moment the poet's hand is steady doesn't mean that the poet is normal. But for a lot of people, the very fact that he's able to light his pipe without a shaking hand, would confirm that there was nothing wrong with this person who has returned from the war. And the poem tells us that this is far from the truth. The steady hand does not confirm wellness or health. Rather, it confirms the opposite. Further:

Books; what a jolly company they are
Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves
Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green,
And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
Come on; O do read something; they're so wise.
I tell you all the wisdom of the world
Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet
You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out.
And listen to the silence; on the ceiling
There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;
And in the breathless air outside the house
The garden waits for something that delays.

Now, the sense that in the midst of comfort, in the midst of pleasure, normalcy, and every good thing that peacetime life can offer, even though the poet is in the midst of all of these

comforts, these comforts fail to provide any relief to the poet. That is the sense. Despite books, despite colors, despite all the comfort, despite having access to all the wisdom of the world, the poet does not partake of that wisdom. Instead, sits and gnaws his nails and lets his pipe out and listens to the silence. And there's a sense that even though there is this great beauty, wisdom, intellectual comfort, peace, natural beauty, there's something ominous about all of this good thing.

There is something tragic and dangerous and dark that maybe is waiting to happen. One doesn't know exactly what, but one knows for certain or seems to know for certain that something bad is about to happen. This is the sense of the line, the garden waits for something that delays. Now, this is a sense of being constantly on edge, being anxious about something, being fearful of something, but not knowing exactly what it is that causes the anxiety. This is a deeply contradictory state and a state that self-perpetuates its anxiety. The anxiety of not knowing the thing which causes anxiety has the effect of intensifying the anxiety ad nauseum. This is the state in peacetime that is experienced by individuals who have served in war. Further, The poet writes,

There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,-
Not people killed in battle,-- they're in France,-
But horrible shapes in shrouds--old men who died
Slow, natural deaths,- old men with ugly souls
Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

Now this line, there must be crowds of ghosts among the trees. This is key to understanding the hallucinations that Septimus constantly undergoes and which describe not only what Septimus is going through, but what England as a whole is going through, as I've repeatedly mentioned in my previous lectures. But here the poet refers to death. Not on the battlefields, but in peacetime, outside the battlefields. And who are these people? Old men who died slow, natural deaths. So the idea that the poet is conveying here is that those who don't have anything, any obvious connection to the war, their deaths are also tinged with the kind of despair and anxiety that wartime deaths attach in the minds of this veteran. So this person, the poet, is so deeply affected by wartime deaths that even so-called natural deaths, right, produce a disproportionately high amount of despair. Further, and this is the final concluding stanza:

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
You'd never think there was a bloody war on!...

Oh yes, you would... why, you can hear the guns.
Hark! Thud, thud, thud,- quite soft... they never cease-
Those whispering guns-
O Christ, I want to go out
And screech at them to stop-I'm going crazy;
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

Now, there's two things happening here, literal and metaphorical gunshot sounds. The literal sounds of the guns having a soft and whispering quality is owing to the fact that to people who are far away, separated by physical distance from the battlefields. The sound of guns is softened like a whisper. Most people who read this poem haven't served in battle. They've probably spent their lifetime in cities or establishments or residential areas, not quite in the center of battle. Now, depending on the location, they might be close or very, very far away from the center of conflict. And they might have heard some of the explosions and the gunshots from a distance. So, this is one sense.

The other sense is that the whispering and the softened quality of the gunshot sounds and explosion is owing to the fact that they are in the memory of the soldier who had served in the war. It is possible that the war is over, that the soldier is nowhere near the battlefield, is in the midst of peacetime civilization. And yet he keeps hearing this whispering, soft gunshot and an explosion. And this whisper eventually grows louder and it achieves gaunt and momentous proportions. And it gets to a point where these sounds start to drive this man crazy. And this is how the poet ends: "I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns."

Now, I'll read one more poem called 'Mental Cases' by Wilfred Owen. This poem describes much more accurately the state of being in which we find Septimus, especially in this last scene in which the novel finds Septimus and which leads to the tragic end of this character. Wilfred Owen writes,

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms

Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

-These are men whose minds the dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable in human squander,
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh
-Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses
-Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

So, these three paragraphs describe two things. First, the veteran who hallucinates, who remembers very vivid scenes of violence. And second, these lines also describe in detail the memories and the actions that unfurled during the war. We know that Septimus is trapped in exactly this kind of a condition. Septimus is unable to escape from the traumatic events that he witnessed and in which he found himself overwhelmed during the war. After that, we find that Septimus is lying on a sofa while Rezia is sewing. This is a scene that's now in the second half of the day. This is the afternoon. We know that in the morning, everyone was out, both Septimus and Rezia, as well as Clarissa and Peter. Everyone was out walking in the sun, looking at grocery stores and appreciating the natural beauty on a clear sunny day. That was earlier in the day. We are now in the second half of the day, in the afternoon. Septimus is sitting on the sofa at home and staring at the trees outside while Rezia is knitting. Something very momentous is about to happen and before that Septimus

is about to take a very big decision and before he takes that decision, the narrator explains to us the psychological state which might have inspired him and enabled him and pushed him to take that decision.

The table drawer was full of those writings; about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries; how there is no death. Lately he had become excited suddenly for no reason (and both Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw said excitement was the worst thing for him), and waved his hands and cried out that he knew the truth! He knew everything! That man, his friend who was killed, Evans, had come, he said. He was singing behind the screen. She wrote it down just as he spoke it. Some things were very beautiful; others sheer nonsense.

So, we see how Septimus inhabits a heightened state of cognitive ability. Septimus makes more of what everyone sees. Everyone has access to the same sights and sounds. But the same sights and sounds produce richer intellectual dividends in Septimus's mind. In describing Septimus thus, Virginia Woolf is illustrating what she had referred to in her essay on being ill, in which she wrote that it is only the recumbent who truly appreciate the comfort in the heartlessness of nature. Septimus has achieved an intensified and a greatly enriched intellectual state. He writes about war, he writes about Shakespeare, he writes about great discoveries, he writes about universal love and death and so on. But he also writes about something else, about his friend Evans, who was killed and appears to have come back. This is the state of mind in which Septimus is, and Rezia has been comforting him by writing down his musings, his ramblings, letting him feel at peace, letting him feel at home. This is the dynamic, this is the state in which they are. They are approaching a sort of peace. Septimus then thinks,

'Holmes is on us', he would say, and he would invent stories about Holmes; Holmes eating porridge; Holmes reading Shakespeare-making himself roar with laughter or rage, for Dr Holmes seemed to stand for something horrible to him. 'Human nature', he called him.

Now, we see in this word human nature, a great violence is being connoted. Holmes is a doctor who oppresses his patient, not out of intention. Holmes is not an evil person. Holmes does not want to cause pain. It is not Holmes's intention to increase the suffering of Septimus. And yet, that's exactly what happens. It is through the actions, through the advice, through the words, through the ideas and through the approach that Holmes has towards Septimus's disability, apparent dysfunctionality, and inability to function.

Holmes's approach causes a great deal of suffering for Septimus. And Septimus calls this not by an individual identifier of cruelty, but simply human nature. It shows us how Septimus views society at large. We get a hint of the visions that Septimus has.

Then there were the visions. He was drowned, he used to say, and lying on a cliff with the gulls screaming over him. He would look over the edge of the sofa down into the sea. Or he was hearing music. Really it was only a barrel-organ or some man crying in the street. But 'Lovely!' he used to cry, and the tears would run down his cheeks, which was to her the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying. And he would lie listening until suddenly he would cry that he was falling down down into the flames! Actually, she would look for flames, it was so vivid. But there was nothing. They were alone in the room. It was a dream, she would tell him, and so quiet him at last. But sometimes she was frightened too.

The narrator describes accurately and realistically the highly non-linear, not very logical and not very realistic thoughts, images and ideas that flit through Septimus's mind. We see what Septimus is thinking from Rezia's perspective. We see how a so-called normal person perceives a so-called disabled or mentally challenged person and through this we get a very critical definition of what hallucinations are. There are times when Septimus's reflections achieve the power of realistic literature. We are told that at some times Rezia begins to look for flames. Septimus describes fires or burning or explosions because those are the memories in which he is trapped, memories of being in the war. And these images are so vivid that they achieve the power of a story, of a great and powerful literary text, like a great literary and realist novel. This is the power that his visions have for Rezia. Through Rezia's empathy, through Rezia's care, through her desire to be of value and comfort and care to Septimus, his hallucinatory visions achieve the power of realistic and vivid story. Nonetheless, she has the insight and the discernment to tell him that it was a dream. Now, we get to this moment where Septimus is about to take a big decision. Septimus senses that Evans is appearing or is about to appear and Septimus starts up in terror. Septimus reacts with fever, with a kind of fever and shock. And he is also shaken by something. This is how Septimus feels.

He started up in terror. What did he see? The plate of bananas on the sideboard. Nobody was there. That was it: to be alone for ever. That was the doom pronounced in Milan when he came into the room and saw them cutting out buckram shapes with their scissors; to be alone for ever.

The visions continue and Septimus screams Evans. He feels certain that he had seen Evans, but he has not. And while he expects to hear Evans and see Evans, he doesn't get anything. We are told that there was no answer.

A mouse had squeaked or a curtain rustled. Those were the voices of the dead. The screen, the coal-scuttle, the sideboard remained to him. Let him, then, face the screen, the coal-scuttle and the sideboard... but Rezia burst into the room chattering.

So we see that Septimus is close to achieving a sort of reconciliation. He is about to accept that what he believes to be real or what he perceives to have the force of reality is in fact not so, is in fact a projection of his mind, a consequence of the trauma that he experienced in the past and all of that is contained in the word the screen. Septimus is beginning to reconcile himself to the fact that he has to manage with the varying claims on reality of this screen that he perceives. Septimus, we can say, is about to achieve a sort of breakthrough in the struggles that he has been facing. But at that moment, something happens and he is disoriented. He is thrown off course. The trajectory on which she was on towards achieving a sort of health or well-being is interrupted because Rezia bursts into the room and she's chattering. She's saying that Holmes is coming upstairs.

Holmes was coming upstairs. Holmes would burst open the door. Holmes would say, 'In a funk, eh?' Holmes would get him. But no; not Holmes; not Bradshaw. Getting up rather unsteadily, hopping indeed from foot to foot, he, [that is Septimus], considered Mr. Filmer's nice clean bread-knife with 'Bread' carved on the handle. Ah, but one mustn't spoil that. The gas fire? But it was too late now. Holmes was coming. Razors he might have got, but Rezia, who always did that sort of thing, had packed them. There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging-house window; the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill). But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. 'I'll give it you!', he cried, and flung himself, vigorously, violently, down onto Mrs. Filmer's...

So, this is the moment when Septimus takes that very radical decision. Now, it is impossible to know what triggers it and that is precisely the state of sympathetic

imagination in which the narrator places us. The narrator has described in great detail the thoughts that Septimus was engaging and how he was on his way to reconciling himself to those thoughts. Septimus is also interrupted by Holmes. Now, Holmes is a doctor who fails to understand the depth and the intensity of the effects that the trauma has had on Septimus. Holmes in some ways worsens Septimus's condition instead of helping him. And it is this arrival of Holmes at a moment when Septimus was almost about to achieve that breakthrough into a kind of calm. It is that interruption which perhaps triggers Septimus into taking a very radical decision. He decides to end his life and he thinks in a very considerate manner about the effect that the decision will have on others. He considers multiple means of doing that and spares a thought for how considerate Rezia was for packing the razors. He also defines how other people perceive tragedy, how the act of ending one's life would appear tragic to others, that is to say the doctors, who have a very objective and in this case insensitive and actually ignorant view of the motivations, the inclinations and the reason why someone like Septimus would do what he was doing. Therefore, he says that Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. They liked to think that it was tragic. They liked to think that there was nothing that anyone could have done to save Septimus. This is a convenient fiction that most of society, most people like to hold on to because it forgives them. We like to hold ourselves innocent in the face of someone else's suffering. We do not wish to recognize our own complicity in the suffering that someone else might be undergoing. Therefore, in this case, these two doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw, are very conveniently fixed in this notion that Septimus's decision was tragic, that everyone tried their best, but somehow the worst had to happen. This is a convenient fiction and Septimus, while not blaming anyone out of spite, gives us enough to understand that there is something very, very intentional about this act and no one can really wash their hands off of Septimus's end. Everyone has a certain interest in normal functioning and good life. And it is that interest, that investment and that complicity which makes them all connected and makes it impossible for others to wash their hands off of Septimus's tragedy.

We will continue discussing the implications of this act for the narrative in the next lecture. Thank you.