

The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches

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Lecture - 34

Mrs. Dalloway: Textual Analysis - III

Hello, learners, and welcome back to this NPTEL course on the English novel. This will be the last lecture in which we will conclude our discussion of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

In the previous lecture, I had read out the moment in which the narrator describes the instant at which Septimus makes a very radical and momentous decision. He decides to take his life by jumping from the window and that moment we understood by reading from the novel in the previous lecture that that decision, Septimus's final irreversible decision, was triggered by several things. Two of those things were his own proximity to achieving a sort of breakthrough, and the other was the sudden arrival of the doctor. So, Septimus's decision is very closely related to his struggles with the mental and physical implications of his experience of serving in World War I. He has been struggling and he comes close to achieving a breakthrough, but right at that moment he notices the arrival of a doctor. And something about the arrival of the doctor seems to negate all of the progress he had made just moments earlier. And it is the combination of hope and despair that perhaps pushes Septimus to make this decision. That's what we read. Now, we will read some sections from the last pages of the novel. And chiefly the goal will be to understand the narrative implications of this choice that Septimus makes. Septimus chooses to take his life and that choice has implications for the novel. It has implications for the character. For characters in the novel, that is, chiefly Clarissa and Richard, among others. But it also has implications for how we read these characters. And it is these implications that we try to understand in this concluding discussion.

The first thing that the narrator provides us with are reactions. How people react once Septimus has taken the decision. The first reaction or the first audible response to this decision, to Septimus's decision, is that of the doctor, that is Holmes. The doctor says, "The coward!" And then the narrator tells us that "The clock was striking-one, two, three: how sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering; like Septimus himself." Reference to the serial strikes of the clock, one, two, three, is a signal to, conveys the objective measurement of time. There is a uniform and external way in which time is

measured and that seems to have very little to do with how time is experienced by individuals. The word sensible that is used to describe the sound of the clock describes how there is an expectation of normalcy and there's an expectation that all of us as individuals organize our experiences to align with a normal and objective and linear way of ordering time. Which is conveyed to us through a public signal, such as the sound of a clock tower striking multiple times to signal the passage of hours. We have seen that for many characters in the novel, not least Clarissa, but especially Septimus, the sound of this public declaration of the passage of time, of the succession of hours signaled by different clock towers striking Big Ben or St. Margaret's or others. This sound has felt to be a sort of violence. It has been experienced as a sort of intrusion. We understood the metaphor of the whip being raised and poised at a state of impending violence. So, the clock is not simply an objective measurement of time. It has the potential to become an act or source of violence. And contrasting with that is Septimus's own way of measuring time. So, this is one reference to how Septimus struggled to organize his experiences and may have finally given up.

Now, immediately after Septimus jumps and falls, there's an ambulance that's called, and who sees this ambulance rushing down the street but Peter Walsh. And we are given an insight into Peter Walsh's thoughts as he observes this ambulance, and here is how Peter thinks.

One of the triumphs of civilization, Peter Walsh thought. It is one of the triumphs of civilization, as the light high bell of the ambulance sounded. Swiftly, cleanly, the ambulance sped to the hospital, having picked up instantly, humanely, some poor devil; some one hit on the head, struck down by disease, knocked over perhaps a minute or so ago at one of these crossings as might happen to oneself. That was civilization. It struck him coming back from the East- the efficiency, the organization, the communal spirit of London. Every cart or carriage of its own accord drew aside to let the ambulance pass. Perhaps it was morbid; or was it not touching rather, the respect which they showed the ambulance with its victim inside-busy men hurrying home, yet instantly bethinking them as it passed of some wife; or presumably how easily it might have been them there, stretched on a shelf with the doctor and nurse...

So, we see there is a very objective assessment of the merits of civilization. Civilization is measured in terms of the material objects and the material comforts it offers to individuals. A very good example of these material objects and material comforts is an ambulance and

the fact that an ambulance can be summoned within minutes of having someone suffering an injury or meeting some sort of misfortune. That and the fact that while the ambulance is moving on the road to the hospital, other cars and pedestrians and everyone else on the road moves away to make way for the ambulance. Peter observes this and is freshly impressed with the organization of life in London. He is freshly impressed because he has just returned from India, that is the reference to East, and he has witnessed a civilization that was less organized, that was less efficient, and generally less desirable than what he observes in London. Now, we know that Peter has always had a very objective material view of what civilization means. Peter's satisfaction with these material comforts is ignorant of the many discomforts that material comforts produce. We have just seen one key instance of the profound and disabling discomfort that civilization can bring in the fate of Septimus. Septimus suffered what he did because he served in the World War. Wars, as we know, are a necessary and inevitable consequence of the kind of modernity, progress and comfort that these people, individuals have observed. So, the technological progress, the material comfort that Peter observes, those things cannot be sustained without violence, without oppression, just outside the borders of England.

This is one of the insights, this is one of the sobering realizations about the cost of peace that this novel has arrived at and would like its readers to appreciate. It is ironic. Peter's observation of the ambulance that carries Septimus and his observation that this ambulance signifies civilization. It does, but not in the way that Peter observes it. In fact, it is a very accurate observation, but the conclusion that the narrator would want readers to draw would be a little bit different, less optimistic than Peter's. The narrator in my view agrees with Peter that this does signify civilization. And if one is being truly aware of what it signifies, the ambulance signifies not just the ability to take someone to a hospital, but also the fact that in a civilization like this, while Peter can observe and be impressed with cars and traffic, there are people who will suffer shell shock and PTSD and who will fail to receive the attention and the treatment and the care they need and who will end up taking these radical and irreversible decisions. This instance of Peter observing something that Septimus is going through and drawing a conclusion which is diametrically opposite to what the narrator would have us draw has happened earlier.

Earlier, Peter had observed Rezia and Septimus in Regent Park and had observed without knowledge of what the two were talking about or thinking about, had simply concluded that it was a typical case of a young couple having an emotional argument and he put it down to being young. Peter said that is what it is to be young, to have romantic associations,

to have expectations from each other, to quarrel, to make each other sad and then to make up and generally to live a life of companionship. This is what Peter had observed when he had seen Septimus and Rezia. Of course, we as readers know how incomplete and ignorant this view is. But that is who Peter is. Peter only observes the external manifestations of reality and remains blind to the psychological impacts or the implications of what is truly happening.

Now, let us now move to the last few pages of the novel in which Clarissa's planned party, the event for which she has been planning from the very first word of the novel- remember the opening of the novel is "Mrs. Dalloway would buy the flowers herself." So she was buying the flowers for this party. She was going to host an event. A lot of things were being done to host that event. That event is finally hosted. Now among the guests at Clarissa's house are these doctors, Bradshaw and Holmes. Bradshaw mentions the fact that Septimus has taken his life. Now that information reaches Clarissa on the last few pages of the novel. Now we see that the structure of the novel finally achieves its completion. We have seen these two parts of the novel being very close but not really touching. So this is when the circle closes its arc. Septimus and Clarissa have been very close to each other since the beginning of the novel. On the street of London in Westminster on Bond Street Clarissa was walking, Septimus was crossing. They were physically close. They were within sight and hearing of each other, but they did not know each other. And now, finally, that coming together of these two characters has been realized. And here is how the narrator puts it.

A young man, (that is what Sir William is telling Mr. Dalloway), had killed himself. He had been in the army. Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought. What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party-the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself-but how? Always her body went through it, when she was told, first, suddenly, of an accident; Her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from the window. Up flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!

So we see, something that again the novel has been hinting at from the very first page, the proximity of death, the inevitability of mortality and the sinking realization that everything that appears joyous and pleasurable will soon end and might end sooner than expected. This sense is brought together, brought to our consciousness in this moment. And Clarissa,

who has been aware of death through her sickness, through her weakness, through the lingering effects of the influenza, comes close to another form of mortality, another form of inevitable and sudden death, which is the impact of the war, the psychological toll that modern civilization and some occupations that are required to sustain modern civilization, the toll that these occupations can take on some individuals, and how this toll can become so overwhelming that it can lead to a person taking their life. And Clarissa puts it thus, she says, "in the middle of my party, here is death, she thought." This is not a shocking or a dramatic or a momentous realization. In fact, it is almost a comforting and a relieving thought. Why? Clarissa has always been aware that death lurks around the corner. She just did not expect it to be confronted with death at a high point in her party, in the middle of her party. Nonetheless, it is still not a surprise or a shock. Death has been Clarissa's only friend, so to speak. And here she comes to terms with it through the fate of another person, not herself, but another person. We are told how her imagination works, how her mind tries to reconstruct the exact act, the experience, the physical sensations, the material experience that Septimus might have undergone as he jumped to his death. And further, Clarissa realizes that through her act of thinking about Septimus's death, she comes to realize that her own understanding of what death means and the implications of death may have been realized. So she tries to wonder why someone would do this.

It appears in the beginning that what Septimus has done is a strange, shocking, inexplicable decision for Clarissa. So she asks, but why had he done it? It seems to be a question that arises from a place of perplexity. But is it really? Let us read more to find out how perplexed is Clarissa really at this decision that Septimus has taken. Clarissa reflects,

This he had preserved (he is Septimus). Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center which, mystically evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death. But this young man who had killed himself-had he plunged holding his treasure? 'If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy', she had said to herself once, coming down, in white.

Now, we realize what Clarissa really thinks of death and how she imagines this person's death might have played out and how the implications of this act as she perceives it. Clarissa defines death not as the end but as something that enables other things ("Death was defiance", "Death was an attempt to communicate", "There was an embrace in death.") What is this communication and embrace that Clarissa is talking about? There is something that connects these two individuals, Clarissa and Septimus. Now, in the narrative structure

of the novel, and in the imagination of sickness, disease, disability that this novel has enabled us to undertake. In that frame, these two characters are intrinsically connected.

Clarissa is someone who has been partially disabled by her experience of the influenza. Septimus has been disabled more obviously, more physically, more completely, more visibly by his experience of shell shock or PTSD. These two experiences, these two forms of disability parallel each other. Influenza was known to everyone, but the kind of suffering it unleashed was not talked about, was not described, was not celebrated or mourned in the way that surviving the war or suffering from the war was celebrated or mourned. Nonetheless, more people died from the influenza than did from the war and it was a powerful shaping influence. The influenza shaped society much more powerfully than the war did. So, these two characters parallel each other through their respective experiences of disease and war. So when one takes their life and the other, surviving, receives this information and describes death as a kind of embrace, it is the narrator who is actually teaching us how to see different forms of suffering. And by seeing the connection between these two individuals and appreciating how one individual, Clarissa, reads the other's death as a kind of embrace, the narrator is asking us as readers to evolve a composite empathetic frame in which we perceive suffering. Suffering that may not be as visible, like the lingering after-effects of the influenza. Suffering that may not be visible like a physical disability or an amputation, like shell shock. Septimus did not suffer from an amputated limb, for instance, but he was disabled by the visions that he had, by the memories. By the unending act of mourning that he undertook for Evans and for all the people who he knew to have died in the war. Suffering that is not visible can still exert a powerful influence on the way people live and the way people cohabit. This is the job for readers and this is how the narrator trains us in what we can do.

At this point, Clarissa also quotes again from Shakespeare again, this time from the play *Othello*. The line that Clarissa quotes is, "if it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy." There are many ways one can read this. On one hand, Clarissa is referring to the state of happiness in which she finds herself because of the successful event that she has hosted. On the other hand, it is also a reference to having found what one wanted and not needing anything more. So, she's trying to imagine the state in which Septimus might be at the moment he decided to take his life. She's also describing herself, she's also trying to speak for herself that after this point, any more happiness, any more addition to the happiness that she has found in her life, might not mean a significant increase and therefore it may as well be okay to end one's life. But then again, these are all possibilities and we

are not sure exactly what this quotation is saying. It is not an act of interpreting Septimus's death, but rather an attempt to view death less as an ending and more as a kind of beginning, as a possibility for something new.

At this point, Clarissa again refers to doctors and we get a hint of what Septimus also felt just at the moment he decided to take his life. Clarissa says

Suppose he had had that passion, and had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage- forcing your soul, that was it-if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?

We see from speculating that Septimus's death was not the end but a beginning, to reflecting on how the insensitivity or the inability of physicians to truly recognize what might be ailing their patients. Clarissa has reached the state in which Septimus was that actually pushed Septimus to take this decision. Clarissa understands that Septimus took his life because physicians made his life intolerable. And at this point, Clarissa also reflects that the two are connected, that those who survive are in some way implicated in the fate of those who don't. This is true as much of war, as of a pandemic, as much it is true of peacetime. There is a kind of deep interconnection between the lives of everyone who shares this earth and it is that sense of connection that is brought home most powerfully to Clarissa in the wake of receiving this information that Septimus has taken his life. Clarissa writes,

Somehow it was her disaster-her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success, Lady Bexborough and the rest of it. And once she had walked on the terrace at Bourton.

So, we see very clearly that Clarissa feels very implicated in the disasters that she has avoided. And very clearly, the one disaster that she has avoided is that of taking her own life. She had walked the terrace. Clarissa understands exactly what Septimus has done and yet not entirely or not completely. It was her disaster and her disgrace. Clarissa understands that she has survived and she has managed to avoid this fate that Septimus has succumbed to. And it makes her profoundly disconcerted. It is a sense of being involved in the fate of

other people and not being able to prevent them from ending up in a tragic situation. It is this sense of being involved, being implicated, but being powerless ultimately, which makes Clarissa look at the sky again.

Now, this is the ending of the novel. This recalls the first page of the novel in which the sun is up and about, and it's a beautiful, clear day in London. At this point, the day is ending. The sun is setting and it is still Westminster. It is still a very tony neighborhood of London. But the thoughts that this person has now are very different. And let us read now to find out more about what Clarissa thinks about mortality, about London, about life in general.

It held, foolish as the idea was something of her own in it, this country sky, this sky above Westminster. She parted the curtains; she looked. Oh, but how surprising!- in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed. And the sky. It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was-ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. It was new to her. The wind must have risen. She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun.

So, we see very beautifully how all of the strands that the narrator had thrown up in the air are brought together, stitched up and taken forward into a new and very sober light. So just as the view that Clarissa appreciates, the view of the setting sun, a woman going to bed,

we see that the novel also takes our thoughts about mortality into the twilight and asks us to reflect on what life is and how we can best survive as well as how can we be the most kind and caring towards those with whom we cohabit this earth.

Let us briefly go over a few moments in this passage. The first thing is, Clarissa gets a sobering realization that it might be foolish, that is to say, she is just a very very privileged woman in Westminster. And yet, despite being privileged, she has gained a great deal of

insight into the human condition. The suffering, the silent, invisible suffering, and also the pleasures, the joys and the happiness of being human, which characterize the human condition. She has gained an insight into these. And just as she admires the setting sun over Westminster, she notices her neighbor, a single woman, somewhat aged, is going to bed. She is alone and she is going to bed. The sight fills Clarissa with a great deal of empathy. She can understand something about this person, even though she does not relate to her quite directly. And it is the sight of this person, this old woman going to bed by herself in the next house, while there is a lively party, while people laughing and shouting in her house, that how these two things can coexist, both being very true, both reflecting something essential, something joyous, something truthful about the human condition. The coexistence of these two things brings Clarissa to a new insight about Septimus's death. She writes, and as she reflects on Septimus's death, the clock begins striking. We know that these sounds are like leaden circles. This is a phrase that Woolf has used. Leaden circles passing through the air, ripples of reminders of objective time. The clock begins striking and Clarissa has this thought that she does not pity Septimus. The refusal of Clarissa to pity Septimus who has taken his life. This is a key and very important point. And then at this point again, more words come to Clarissa's mind. Words that she had seen in the display, the glass display window of a bookshop, about 200 pages earlier in the novel, that is to say on the very first page of the novel, which are words from Shakespeare's play Cymbeline, 'Fear no more the heat of the sun'. So, we see how in this party, receiving news of the death of a man she did not know brings Clarissa to a profound realization of what mortality is. Not only a realization of what mortality is, that is a fate that awaits all of us, a condition that connects all of us, but Clarissa also comes to a realization that the world that she shares is populated by individuals who have experiences she cannot understand and yet despite cohabiting this earth with individuals she cannot understand, she has arrived at a sense of appreciating these experiences, appreciating the diversity of experiences and realizing that everyone has been made familiar with mortality and mortality or this familiarization is not something to despair about, but rather something which allows us to find unexpected forms of beauty.

Thank you.