

DUALISM BETWEEN THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS. DALLOWAY AND TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf, a versatile author accomplished much in the limited span of her creative years and enriched the modern English novel. With her unique style and her deep understanding of minds of her characters, she is one of the forerunners of feminist writing. However, one of her greatest accomplishment, as will be explored here, is her intriguing methods of presenting greater meanings of life in the portrayal of people. In her novels, Woolf examines how the greater epistemological questions of Being and Life can be explored through an appreciation of the connections and relationships, both apparent and profound, of people, with themselves and with others. In her two novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf analyses these questions, leaving unanswered, the final question of Life and provides merely ambiguous clues as to her possible revelation. To seek answers to these questions and find Woolf's focus, one must probe into her reoccurring themes of human relationships throughout these two novels to see that the very process contains within it the possible answer.

This paper seeks to explore the hidden meanings in the above mentioned novels by Virginia Woolf and the implications of her narrative techniques in understanding her characters. Other than Woolf's works, I have taken, as secondary source, three essays by critics viz. "The Terror and The Ecstasy" by Patricia Matson; "Towers in the Distance" by Diane Cousineau; and "Silent as the Grave" by Jane Fisher. This paper also analyses possible symbols and meaning to life's questions as presented in Woolf's works, the connections and rifts between human relationships and the recurring presence and importance of Death in life in Woolf's narration.

Keywords: Life, Symbols, Being, Self, Meaning, Relationships.

The pertinent theme in Virginia Woolf's 'Mrs. Dalloway' is the question of life and death co-existing with the characters' emotional and mental associations. A theme in which Woolf addresses the meaning of Life and Death, failure and happiness and, and the Self, are questions that philosophers around the world have explored since Socrates. Woolf balances the importance of individual self and other human beings and their co relation and communication through the portrayal of characters that are ambiguously interconnected with each other. The question of life and death is dwelt on sincerity and straightforwardness throughout the novel, which teems with numerous characters.

When the main character, Clarissa Dalloway, goes out to buy flowers for her party, she ponders over the meaning of being and the inevitability of death while focusing and carrying on with her trivial social matters. Her fusing of the two oppositions in one fluid force becomes the proposed hypothesis throughout the rest of the novel:

"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; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; 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." (Mrs. Dalloway, 9).

This statement, this thought of being ever present in other's lives while retaining at the same time a sense of individualism, becomes the premise on which Woolf's philosophy on the meaning of life and death begins. The significance of being in harmony with others while retaining and stressing the significance of the individual self is expressed vividly through Mrs. Dalloway's heroine, Clarissa Dalloway. The sanctity of emotions and the need to preserve the privacy of human emotions while maintaining a discrete expression of emotions in connection to the social strata, is made clear through the character of Clarrisa Dalloway. Woolf creates Clarissa Dalloway as an older woman who, many years ago, had married Richard Dalloway, a conservative government officer, and someone typically representative of a strict social establishment. Clarissa gives herself completely to Richard Dalloway

and becomes Mrs. Dalloway, but all the while she has retained the intimacy of her inner self:

"For in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him." (Mrs. Dalloway, 8).

This isolation of self is then contrasted to the misfit character of Peter Walsh who, in loving Clarissa passionately and interfering with her intimate relations with Sally Seton, left little room for her private self:

"But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into." (Mrs. Dalloway, 8).

This fluidity of thought between Clarissa and Peter can be observed at various junctures throughout the novel; Clarissa, however, believes that while it may be direct and ever present communication of feeling between Peter and herself, even love, it is not positive and actually has detrimental affect on her's and Peter's lives,

"And it was intolerable, and when it came to that scene in the little garden by the fountain, she had to break him or they would have been destroyed, both of them ruined." (Mrs. Dalloway, 8).

A similar idea can be seen underlying Clarissa's love for Sally Seton, where Clarissa feels the mixture of both passionate emotion to express and the need to preserve her necessary privacy, to hold a part of herself to herself; hence the upsetting scene in the garden with Sally and Peter. Clarissa's life is balanced by her opposing tendencies to love passionate, wild, and overly-communicative people and her reserve in expressing herself to the ones she loves.

Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked War soldier, often seen by critics as Clarissa's counterpart in the novel, recognizes the claims of his own emotions, but refuses, to an extreme degree, to conform to the social world's establishment. The reader can discern his private emotions, such as when he talks to the dead or rejoices in the beauty of unrestrained being; and therefore, he is considered too defiant and is oppressed by members of the 'establishment'. His eventual suicide reveals that he was willing to 'take the plunge' that he spurns the counterpart lift of emotions connected with the integration and compromise of self for society (Mrs. Dalloway, 3).

Clarissa, on the other hand, engages in both spectrums of emotion, "What a lark! What a plunge!" (Mrs. Dalloway, 3).

Septimus's suppressed emotions were finally uplifted by his plunge, when he delves into the unknown world of death, wherein now he could become part of all that world with which he has had interaction.

Matson believes that through the character of Septimus Warren Smith, Woolf represents "the crushing of the human spirit as a consequence of dogmatic patriarchal authority." (Matson, 174).

Septimus's refusal to suppress and let go of his fears and agony of war and pain is a source of social embarrassment and concern for proportioned individuals and this alienates him further from the realm of society, and connects him to the individual portion of the spectrum.

Matson, on the other hand, thinks that the character Sir William Bradshaw, the dreary physician who believes he knows the way to Septimus's recovery, is the typical and ultimate representative of this establishment, a self-serving and oppressive authority, "Woolf shows us that his notions of an acceptable social impulse are discursive fabrications that keep at bay whatever threatens to disrupt the order that serves him so well." (Matson, 174).

Sir William, described with the gray drabness of mediocrity, is the extreme of domination and power, and therefore, finds the expression and communication of any sort of emotion other than dullness quite reprehensible (Mrs. Dalloway, 94). His response and cure for Septimus Smith's distress is a plan to take him away and seclude him in a faraway hospital, not with an intent to cure him, but to secure his favouring governing order which made him so successful. In doing so, Sir William prohibits Septimus Smith from communicating"

"Try to think as little about yourself as possible." (98).

However, as shown with Clarissa Dalloway, this attempt to dissolve oneself completely into others or into oneself and always marginalizing oneself to communication acceptable to others brings

about the downfall of man and ends up in annihilation of self.

While Matson discloses the chaos in which Woolf's characters have been placed, it must be granted that Woolf does give them options to survive, allowing them time and circumstances to explore each one, until she finds one that seems to work well with the self and the world, "Posing, as it does a challenge to authority in all its various forms without ever becoming prescriptive." (Matson, 163).

While she may not ultimately indicate any one specific point of view, Woolf clearly empathizes towards Clarissa's thoughts and feelings, as she seems to have a close and almost personal insight on Clarissa's psyche and self. In addition, Clarissa appears to be the most well-rounded individual of all the characters. In a way, Woolf, very subtly leads the characters, and consequently the audience throughout the question of being and self. Matson elaborates, "The spectator's (reader's) quest is not simply to accept the writing process but also to translate that process into "some ultimate word" (Matson 166).

This 'ultimate word' is something which is perhaps the compendium of self and life; the interpretation of relations and love and society and death- all in one. The barrier to this discovery, in Mrs. Dalloway, is the suppression of the self-caused by the dictates of the patriarchal social construction and the marginalization of personal emotions and interests for the supposed good of the whole and the benefit of the powerful.

Woolf's search for this is evident, as Fisher explains, "She attempts to bridge not only the gap between the living and the dead but a more stubborn discipline between the living and the living" (Fisher 95).

This search also continues into Virginia's other prolific novel, 'To the Lighthouse', which expounds upon her previous thought in further depths. 'To The Lighthouse' delineates characters at the end of the spectrum; however, Woolf does not present an exact middle-ground, such as in Mrs. Dalloway, perhaps suggesting that the answer is not as simple. Although the polar ends of the spectrum could be easily identified, the characters balancing the centre are of much more interest when it comes to the question of being. In the essay, "Towers in the Distance," Cousineau explores the experiences of this extreme emotional spectrum, using gender issues to present her argument,

however, there can be another angle to hypotheses. Mr. Ramsay is seen as the logic-bound philosopher, a man of the world, who is creatively inspired by his beautiful and home-loving wife and his perception of his "perfect" family. Mrs. Ramsay is the muse-mother who feels her only and ultimate duty is to make everyone happy and protect them from the harsh realities of life. In Cousineau's essay, the lighthouse is suggestive and representative of the human genders, "From the base of broad receptivity, the tower grows narrower as it ascends, suggesting that the containing female vessel is finally to be transcended at a point that is exclusively male and isolate" (Cousineau, 54).

Although, as Cousineau points out, Woolf decidedly employs gender as a main theme in their expression, a broader, more enveloping issue lurks around the corners. Though gender is a central and certain issue, this idea of the tower can also be perceived as the representative of human identities searching for the right place in the vast spectrum of life's happiness and content. The 'creative force' at the plinth of the tower symbolises the social realm; the idea of self-influencing and interacting with others and receiving impressions in. The peak of the tower symbolises something transcendental and yet personal, things and issues of more intellectual nature without the trivial issues of domestic and materialistic concerns of life, as children, marriage, social position, etc.

Mr. Ramsay typically represents the patriarchal and linear visions of oppressive society; however, though he is overbearing, he has redeeming qualities, but it seems he cannot free himself from the strong mindset of the male-dominated universe, which again melds the notions of position with gender. Woolf depicts Mr. Ramsay as a strong character representing the patriarchal peak of the tower,

"He was incapable of untruth; never tampered with a fact; never altered a disagreeable word to suit the pleasure or convenience of any mortal being, least of all his own children, who, sprung from his loins, should be aware from childhood that life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage to that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks founder in darkness" (To The Lighthouse, 4).

Mrs. Ramsay stands for a different view,

“To pursue truth with such an astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so wantonly, so brutally, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency that, without relying, dazed and blinded, she bent her head as if to let the pelt of jagged hail, the drench of dirty water, bespatter her unrebuked” (To The Lighthouse, 32).

Mrs. Ramsay's concerns are mainly related to the social and relational aspects of life; she is a source of comfort and inspiration for others. These two main and apparently polar 8 concerns are met in the middle by numerous characteristics elements contained within the children and Lily Briscoe.

Woolf makes an effort to explore and, often times, refute certain arguments which could resolve the conflict between the two opposing views. She hints that the marriage of contradictory concerns to one another may not be an answer; and she explores this view through the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and the younger and more modern couple, Minta and John. In both these marriages, the domination of one partner over the other in makes the other dependent and weak, which in the long run destroys marital concord and happiness and renders the union only a social compromise, going to the extent that the ill effect is precipitated in children's life as well. Prue Ramsay dies in childbirth one year after her "happy" marriage, "Which was indeed a tragedy, people said, everything, they said, had promised so well" (To The Lighthouse,132), while her brother, Andrew, dies in the Great War, significant of man's intellectual idealism bringing on its own destruction (To The Lighthouse, 133). Woolf seems to be making a point that such water tight compartmentalization of roles making a point that these roles do not provide the answers to life, and in fact, could hamper harmony of itself, or could bring deaths. And yet sometimes deaths reawakens the significance of life and the import of living it in the most satisfactory, productive and beneficial leading to content and happiness- to both, the individual self and the society. Fisher believes this is crucial to the quest to Woolfs meaning:

“Yet in its destructive capacity, death also guarantees the defeat of these searches for a stable absolute that can resist time” (Fisher, 100).

This quest for an ultimate meaning resurfaces to attempt, where marriage has failed, to unite meaningfully, the two ends in a balance. Fisher, however, believes that Woolf has twisted the conservative meanings into something much more penetrating and ambiguous,

“Although the goal is unattainable, the novel portrays that the effort to reach such a goal is heroic” (Fisher, 101). On the contrary, as Woolf conveys, this process itself, this struggle for preserving balance of self contains within it the answers to life’s claims, as Fisher believes, “What life means finally cannot be separated from how it achieves meaning” (To The Lighthouse, 102). Here we can see that Woolf believes in moderation and the essentiality of sincerity and purity of the self.

While Mrs. Ramsay attempts to keep windows, perhaps windows of communication, open, she finds a difficulty, “Every door was left open” (To The Lighthouse, 27). But the over-production of communication renders her unable to express herself completely and privately, because she is much too open to giving and receiving others into her personal realm. This inability of Mrs. Ramsay, to have a part of herself to herself, a private self, eventually leads her to her death, leaving, Mr. Ramsay unable to carry on without her muse-like influence on him. In this sense, their marriage was not a success because, in the long run, both of them could neither relate to their private selves nor to their social atmospheres, and were left completely lost and destroyed. In addition, their lack of harmony and deep dissatisfaction created a destructive role model for others whom they influenced.

Thus the process of discovery of self is entwined with the salvation of humanity and the purport of life as is subtly portrayed in these two particular novels. Here the characters who alter or transcend these heavily pressed upon boundaries in the spectrum come closer to achieving the creative communion between self and others. Lily

Briscoe is an excellent example of this androgynous and balanced self. Her struggle to find her place in life and her attempts at great artistry can be seen as her efforts to attain immortality, a desire to continue living after death, through painting. Lily’s communication to herself is similar to Clarissa Dalloway’s thought that she is part of everyone and everything she has come into contact with

throughout her life.

However, Lily also recognizes the constraints of this ambiguous communication, "It would be hung in the servant's bedrooms. It would be rolled up and stuffed under a sofa" (To the Lighthouse, 158). It is perhaps indicative of the significance of the social realm of art as well as it and personal expression of self. This appreciation of the significance of both aspects of being is a clear sense of revelation, through which Lily finds herself completing her work of art; despite much difficulty. Although she chooses to remain unmarried which was a characteristically 'male' tendency, her inherently female and social sensibility consciousness help her in this process.

Cam and James, symbolising the future of human progress, also foreshadow an attempt at preserving balance self and others. Both are quite attached and connected to their mother in early life, who is representative of the social side of the spectrum, while it is seen that there is a large rift between Mr. Ramsay and themselves:

"But they vowed, in silence, as they walked, to stand by each other and carry out the great compact-to resist tyranny until death" (To The Lighthouse,163). However, both of them are much influenced by their father and his individuality, as reflected in the poetry line, "We perished, each alone" (To the Lighthouse, 191). This consciousness of individualism and responsibility is something which brings the scales into balance towards the ends of the novel, as they travel towards the lighthouse. According to Cousineau, the lighthouse also represents symbolically, the androgynous aspect of human life and sensibility, as it contains both the 'male' features and 'female' features. Cousineau claims that Woolf did this to lead the reader towards contemplation of the answers of life, where no one has thought to look in a dominantly patriarchal society:

"In place of unified and coherent subject and linear time, she insisted on fragmented moments of subjectivity lived simultaneously in the present, past and future" (Cousineau, 56). This probe into the meanings through a different prospective gives Woolf and her readers an advantage to explore and understand the idea of self in a new way, which perhaps is symbolic of the way in which people perceive meanings in life. Woolf explores various options without suggesting any particular answer, and leaving much for readers to reflect upon and find. Her characters are not linear models and are

imitations of life. The actual fulfillment of self-resides in a creative quest of the riddles and claims of life and death and in the recognition that death-the inevitable is the ultimate-and yet it's also the beginning. Fisher describes this idea:

“The valorization of process arises from the novel's awareness of temporal inevitability and a teleology that leads only to death” (Fisher, 101).

Mr. Ramsay also becomes an important figure in this discovery, as his newfound attachment with his children after Mrs. Ramsay's death gives him a great sense of balance and peace which promises a new future for the children and himself. As they proceed to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay's children, although subconsciously, seem to be affected by his presence:

“for she was safe, while he sat there; safe, as she felt herself when she crept in from the garden, and took a book down, and the old gentleman, lowering the paper suddenly, said something very brief over the top of it about the character of Napoleon” (To The Lighthouse,191).

This sense of security comes when Cam has learnt to balance her yearning for individual and intellectual needs that she acquired from her father with social adaptability and connections. James also seems to accept his father's affection and recent compliments, although they must reach the island of the lighthouse before this occurs, “He was so pleased that he was not going to let anyone share a grain of his pleasure” (to the Lighthouse, 206). Although towards the end they leave the island of their childhood to arrive with their father at the tower, which is a phallic symbol, they have, within themselves, a part of their original beings. Here the relational need of man is clearly evident, even though they express it through individual needs.

Woolf has endeavoured successfully to provide the reader and her characters with what Matson called ‘subversive keys’ to her vision of life and its meaning (Matson, 164). She, very subtly hints at maintaining the delicate balance between the crucial nature of both relational and individual exploration and their inter-dependence. To live and live completely and in harmony with self, one must develop these parts equally, for each is vital to the other's flourishing-and both are necessary to happiness and peace. This idea is explored and expressed, in both her primary novels, Mrs. Dalloway

and *To the Lighthouse*. The three scholars quoted above provide the necessary input in the argument. Matson explores the balance between Clarissa Dalloway's domination and chaotic rebellion. Cousineau analyses the import and role of gender and the spectrums of this, while Fisher studies Woolf's meanings of death connections between past, future, and life. Thus, in these novels, Woolf portrays to explain the ultimate purpose of life and humanity, which can be attained by preserving an ambiguous balance between self and others in the larger realm of intellectual and social environment.

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