

On Life and Death: History and English Modernism in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Modernist literature of the early twentieth century in England represented an extreme shift from the writing styles of the preceding Victorian period. Modernist form, structure, content, and themes in both poetry and prose were radically different from those of their forerunners. The origin of such dramatic changes can be traced back to the historical context in which this literature was written; as the end of the Victorian age signaled the decreasing stability of the empire, economy, politics, and even society itself, the rising modern age saw an increase in global warfare and violence, moral and ethical dilemmas, and a rise in political ideologies that threatened the security of humanity. Most notably, the First World War marked the beginning of a transformed, utterly modern world and was undeniably impactful on the way the English thought and lived; the conflict altered the very essence of what it meant to be human. This essay holds that the English literature of the early twentieth century, as exemplified by Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), was not only directly shaped by the history preceding it, but also affected the history that emerged from it, the combination of which ultimately showcases how one can learn about and understand history through other forms of expression, such as art and literature.

Art is nearly always influenced by the major events, social values and beliefs, and circulating philosophies and ideas that characterize the historical period and geographical location from which it emerged. In literary works, for example, historical context can be exhibited directly in setting and dialogue or indirectly through underlying themes and takeaway messages; in both cases are the experiences of the author informative to the development of the composition. English Modernist literature demonstrates this phenomenon through the reactions of the public to two major issues in the early 1900s: the aftermath of World War I, and the rise of sociopolitical

ideologies such as fascism, communism, and socialism that began to take hold in nations and governments worldwide. On the one hand, the conflict involved so much violence and death for the United Kingdom—over one million British casualties—that at the war’s end, a common feeling of relief and gratitude for survival flooded the islands. Death had never been so close, even for those who were not directly fighting in or located near any of the battles. In the wake of such fear, an appreciation for life rose from the ashes of the destruction. On the other hand, ideological change—while the extent of its impacts on European society was equally as widespread—pertains to the confusion and fear felt by many as ideological shifts in politics threatened the social stability of countries, even those physically halfway across the world. For example, the stereotypes and personas that came to define communism, and the predictions of detrimental and chaotic futures in which class structure was uprooted were frightening to the British public, and particularly to the aristocratic figures that were presumably expected to experience a downfall. As disorganization in the governments and militaries of both European and non-European countries caused them to lean towards and accept the strategies of communism that seemed evil or tyrannical to countries that were more democratic and capitalist, a “domino theory” emerged; this theory proposed that once countries with a certain level of influence in their respective areas fell to communism, so would the others in those areas, thus predicting an unstoppable spread of global chaos. One of the biggest effects of the threat of these frightening ideologies and their corresponding predictions was the fear felt by ordinary people, especially as they were already troubled by World War I, the economic distress building up to the Great Depression, and the political distress building up to World War II. Though partly traced back to the confusion surrounding these ideologies themselves, this public fear was also a result of the inability or unwillingness of members of the British upper classes to change their way of life in any manner at all. The Victorian period of the mid to late nineteenth

century, which directly preceded the Modernist period in English history, was understood by the English themselves as an era of stability, characterized by the sixty-three-year-long reign of Queen Victoria, and is representative of Great Britain as an imperial power with influence over all corners of the Earth. However, the Victorians were in an uproar as the aging of the queen and the end of the century—the *fin-de-siècle*—sparked a theory that the empire would experience a fall from grace much like the fall of the Roman Empire, and that the prosperity of the nineteenth century was too good to be true and could only lead to decline. In this way, the English were afraid of fracture in the nation's economic and social spheres, not just its political and imperial spheres, which had symbolized and upheld the power of the Victorian age for decades. Both English aristocrats and the English middle-class were tradition-oriented and steadfast in their morals and values as they related to stability and wealth, so with the rise of the Modernist period came a firm societal reluctance to alter that long-standing pattern in any form.

The literature and art of the English Modernist age reflect the historical background of their time in ways that demonstrate the impact of historical circumstances on both individuals and on social patterns and society as a whole. One literary theme relating to history's influence on individuals is the elevation of the banality of life, which in the context of World War I was a method of filling the void that the conflict left in people's hearts, minds, and souls. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) consists of several characters that experience this love of life and admire the beauty of the world in response to the horrors of the world around them. Most notably, the main character, Clarissa Dalloway, constantly expresses her appreciation of the mundane things in life—the beauty of life itself—though not having herself fought in the war. An aging, married elite and professional socialite in the early 1920s, Clarissa reflects on her own life and the misfortunes that continue to internally haunt her: falling out of touch with a close friend; rejecting

a love match in favor of a more suitable but unfulfilling marriage; experiencing a disconnect from society as she grows older and clings to the past. The first two hardships occurred before the war, and they both directly resulted from Clarissa's decisions; they reflect the instability of the mind in areas such as decision-making brought on by the emerging political ideologies that affected the social and economic circumstances surrounding Clarissa in her youth. However, Clarissa's alienation from the society's popular circle of the upper class is directly related to both widescale political changes and the aftermath of World War I; in addition to demonstrating how those who were adults in the early 1900s and 1910s bore the brunt of the war's effects as society's new "normal" afterwards completely altered the way of life that they had known for so long, this detail in the novel presents the circumstances of upper-class English society as they refuse to let go of tradition and the memory of their past glory, especially when maintaining such traditions became a way of coping. Though she acknowledges her own discontent about the platonic and romantic relationships in her life, Clarissa is optimistic about most things and holds everyone and everything she knows in extremely high regard. Rather than dwelling on her misfortunes, she distracts herself from the terrible things happening around her by focusing on the joy she finds in simple things: "she enjoyed life immensely. It was her nature to enjoy...she enjoyed practically everything."¹ This heightening of the banal counters the draining effects of the war for her; though time has passed and the process of healing for society has begun, individuals in Clarissa's world still feel the lingering effects that are difficult to move past. Clarissa copes with those effects by openly loving everything in her life and not taking even the smallest of things for granted. Her method of dealing with the dramatic societal changes is so strong and active in her day-to-day life that she is indifferent to the unfortunate situations that surround her, especially regarding broader issues of

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1981), 78.

humanity. For example, the Armenian genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire during and immediately after World War I is mentioned in the novel as a circulating subject among English aristocratic society, a subject that brought much horror to European individuals and induced much sympathy for the hundreds of thousands of Armenians that were killed. Instead of agreeing with the English opinion that the genocide was awful and that something had to be done, Clarissa simply decides not to dwell on the incident so as to maintain her own peace of mind: “she cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice...she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses.”² Though she recognizes that awful things do happen in the world, she feels that the beautiful things are more deserving of attention because they make life itself more enjoyable. Clarissa would rather appreciate the beauty of life than constantly worry about its miseries. The lingering long-term effects of historical events, such as and especially including the Great War, of the English Modernist period were felt differently by each individual. Finding joy in the banal was necessary for many as a strategy to counter the horrors of the epoch and remind themselves to treasure each day amidst such horrors. The representation of this phenomenon in Woolf’s novel serves as evidence of the impact of historical circumstances on individuals; social patterns, behaviors, and beliefs were altered just as they are in Clarissa’s case to fit the experiences and trauma resulting from those experiences in real life. *Mrs. Dalloway* provides an example of how individuals in the early twentieth century felt an elevated appreciation for the mundane things in life in a way that acted as a coping mechanism for living with the chaos of the period’s rapidly and dramatically changing qualities.

² Woolf, 120.

The embodiment of history's impact on individuals in Modernist literature does not only reveal the tendency of the British public to reassess one's values and change one's attitudes about life in the wake of difficult times; literature also reveals the inability of individuals to describe their feelings—both to themselves and to others—in the first place because they do not know what it is that they are feeling. The circumstances of the early twentieth century were completely new to everyone, and no one could have predicted how these occurrences would play out. Every civilization had experienced wars and military conflict before, but World War I, with its emerging technology more destructive than ever seen, was unique for its grip on so many countries and nations around the world, its high count of casualties, and its lasting effect on the world after the war's end. The war itself was also considered unexpected and different by the English for its underlying implications and indications; the internal problems of the British Empire were exposed and directed outwardly, which contrasted the preceding Victorian habit of focusing inwardly on matters of both the public and private spheres. This change was also consistent with the sociopolitical ideologies that arose around the same time; these doctrines presented new territory on which the English—and the world, for that matter—had not yet tread, and many of such ideas were so outlandish that individuals had difficulty understanding and forming opinions about them. The unfamiliarity of the period's affairs and its effect on the ability of the English to discuss them with any clarity is alluded to in *Mrs. Dalloway* through different subject matter, as in one example, in Richard Dalloway's incapability to admit his love to his wife. Clarissa and Richard have been married for many years and share a child with one another, but he was not Clarissa's first pick for marriage. Rather than choosing to marry the man she already loved, Peter Walsh, she chose Richard for his steadfast nature and the guarantee of stability in all aspects of British life including money and social standing; this decision reaffirms Clarissa's distaste for and fear of chaos and the

unknown. As a result of the reasons for this union, despite their years-long commitment to each other, Richard and Clarissa are not affectionate or verbally open about their feelings. However, towards the end of the novel, Richard has an epiphany that introduces him to the fact that he of course loves his wife and always has, and there is no reason she should not know his true opinion of her. He decides on his way home to surprise Clarissa with flowers and declare his love for her, but when the moment comes, he is unable to verbalize his planned speech: “he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words.”³ Richard’s difficulty expressing that which he feels is just one example of how the novel actualizes the same obstacle endured by English individuals regarding the unusualness of their modern situation. This scene provides insight into how the historical elements surrounding a particular group of people can shape their behaviors and abilities to complete seemingly simple tasks; the actualization of this societal occurrence as it is presented in the novel in relation to a specific moment in time conveys the importance of historical context and its influence on the development of literary works.

Since *Mrs. Dalloway* is structured to highlight each character’s stream of consciousness—their individualized ways of thinking as they move through time—the novel focuses primarily on the ways in which historical circumstances affect the individuals in England. However, there are several cases in which alterations in social patterns and effects on society as a whole are demonstrated as well, particularly as the novel touches on the English fear of change in the early twentieth century. This anxiety was a result of the rapidly surfacing ideologies and technologies that began to dominate social, economic, and military processes around the world. These political philosophies, such as fascism and socialism, were perceived as a threat to the traditional, well-known way of life that the English cherished so much, particularly relating to how government

³ Woolf, 118.

was run and how money was circulated to uphold the class structure of the British Empire. Moreover, arising technologies included weapons such as tanks and poison gas that were proven in World War I to be far more destructive than anything used in previous military conflicts; not only were they a threat to the physical security of England and her people, they induced a power shift as countries strove to one-up each other with such advancements, threatening the British Empire's role as the most militarily powerful force in the world. In the nineteenth century, the Victorians brought the empire to its height in all regards, the benefits of which were almost solely reaped by the upper class. Thus, any dangers within and outside the empire were taken as personal attacks on the aristocracy, for it was the social elites that had everything to lose. Fear of change ran rampant among members of the English upper class in the early twentieth century as they struggled to justify their dominating role in society and maintain such influence in the midst of the period's chaos. This worry is depicted in *Mrs. Dalloway* when Clarissa is briefly reunited with Peter Walsh, the man whom she had loved in her youth but opted not to marry. Not having seen him in over twenty years, Clarissa thinks to herself that Peter appears to be just the same as when she last saw him: his physical looks, his mannerisms and verbal habits, his attitudes and values. However, Peter observes that Clarissa is quite different from what he remembers of her, though he decides he "shan't tell her anything about it, he thought, for she's grown older."⁴ Clarissa is delighted to find that Peter has not changed at all because she values consistency and predictability, as all Victorians—for she was raised during the Victorian era—did. Peter, on the other hand, knows that she would not take kindly to his observation that she herself has changed, so he refrains from telling the outward truth so as to not upset Clarissa with the notion that the changes she has experienced are bad; he knows that change goes against the strict rigidity of time that Clarissa was

⁴ Woolf, 40.

taught to respect. This scene is reminiscent of the broader cultural anxiety regarding change, which is ever-present in English history, but is especially so in the early twentieth century, as it trades the real, specific threat of shifts in politics and power dynamics for the more generalized concept of change itself to reflect the historical background of the novel. Moreover, this exchange is indicative of English society's expectations relating to gender during this period, as Peter is more critical of Clarissa's physical and habitual changes than she of his. English women, even in the twentieth century, were expected to uphold a certain standard of beauty—that is, one of youthfulness—and carry themselves in a way that alluded to their innocence and purity; such natural growth and masculine development in men, on the other hand, was seen as an intimation of their maturity, wisdom, and power. Peter's impression of Clarissa after such a long time reflects this gendered dynamic in demonstrating that change among women is even more negatively viewed by society than change among men; thus, he decides to not share his thoughts with Clarissa so as to not remind her that her aging does not reflect positively on her character and outward presence in society.

Though it is more commonly recognized that history directly impacts literature, it is also important to recognize that literature affects history as it is in the making because readers connect to themes and overarching lessons, thus implementing such solutions to social and emotional issues as individuals; this is especially true in the early Modernist period as postwar literature served to teach readers how to cope with the atrocities and fearful effects of the past. *Mrs. Dalloway* presents memory and nostalgia as the key to dealing with the negative parts of the past in the present day while simultaneously worrying about the future. In Woolf's novel, Clarissa is constantly reminded of positive moments in her past in relation to what she experiences in the present; she relies heavily on her memories to remind herself of the happiness and content she

once felt. For example, she recalls that she always feels like a schoolgirl again when she is around her old friend Hugh Whitbread; she is “attached to him, partly from having known him always.”⁵ She finds comfort in Hugh—despite the fact that he is a disliked figure by many of the other characters in the novel—because he is included in so much of her memory. He gives her a nostalgic feeling that drags her back to her younger years and reminds her of their past friendship; she knows what she can expect from him, and in such a changing world, that bit of certainty is what she needs. Clarissa uses her memories to relive the good moments of her past life, which ultimately helps her appreciate her present life more; such a mentality traces back to and enhances Clarissa’s elevation of the banality of life—her method of coping with the complexities and uncertainties of the period. This portrayal in *Mrs. Dalloway* could be understood as a lesson for Woolf’s audience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as she influences how her readers might choose to react to and cope with certain historical events as they happen.

Though he is not the titular character of the novel, Septimus Warren Smith represents the other half of Clarissa’s coin in that he shares her love of beauty and the mundane but expresses it differently. A soldier in World War I who saw a close friend killed in front of his eyes, Septimus was taught by the war to cut off emotional responses to protect himself from the atrocities he witnessed and committed. However, the continuation of such repression leaves him empty and hollow. He is assessed by doctors as they try to alleviate his discomfort, but nothing is physically wrong with him, so their presence only agitates him more. In the midst of the chaos, he contemplates killing himself—especially since the doctors and his own wife expect that he might—but he admits to himself that he has no real desire to do so: “but why should he kill himself for their sakes? Food was pleasant; the sun hot.”⁶ When he finally commits to ending his life as he

⁵ Woolf, 6.

⁶ Woolf, 92.

cannot bear that no one understands or is even willing to listen to what he has to say about his experience and perception of livelihood—he knows his issue pertains to his lack of feeling caused by the war, but he is ignored and diagnosed as mad and depressed—he decides how to do it but reiterates to himself that “he would wait till the very last moment” because “he did not want to die. Life was good.”⁷ Septimus’s appreciation of life, resulting from his time facing death, reflects a common feeling in the early twentieth century: once one nearly touches death, life has never felt so good. For Woolf’s readers in the Modernist period, that which Septimus values despite his situation teaches them the especially important need for appreciation and gratitude in times of chaos; in the twenty-first century, the same lesson is still applicable and can be influential to readers in contemporary circumstances that are less than positive.

Clarissa and Septimus do not know each other personally, and it is not until her party at the end of the novel that a guest speaks of his tragic death by suicide. Clarissa initially frowns upon the talk, thinking, “in the middle of my party, here’s death.”⁸ This subconscious response can seem somewhat selfish, but her thought reflects the more general attitudes of the upper class when discussing unfortunate but not personally relevant situations; Septimus does not come from wealth and is therefore a subject of only pity amongst the aristocrats in attendance at Clarissa’s party. However, once Clarissa learns that the deceased was a soldier who was haunted by the plagues of the modern day, her perception of his death changes as she begins to understand Septimus’s own thinking in killing himself. Instead of viewing his choice as something disturbing or a cause for sympathy, she acknowledges the bravery of sacrifice for the promise of a more feeling future: “death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate...There was an embrace in death.”⁹

⁷ Woolf, 149.

⁸ Woolf, 183.

⁹ Woolf, 184.

Septimus kills himself, despite possessing a unique love of life following his experience in World War I, for the sake of not settling for a miserable and unsatisfying life; he would rather not live at all than not live his life to what he perceives as the fullest, and he makes his decision to honor this vow. Clarissa recognizes Septimus's rebellion against the constraints of "normal" modern society and applauds him for his respect of and need for a fulfilling life. Septimus does not want to be controlled by an outsider, alluding to the fear of the period's political ideologies that threatened the everyday freedoms of individuals. His sacrifice reminds Clarissa at the end of the novel—after she has spent the day reflecting on and being conflicted about her relationships, fears, and feelings—that one must appreciate what one has in life while they have it, and that life is not worth living if it is not appreciated. Though this scene is powerful partially for its gripping relevance to the English Modernist period, the lesson is designed to encourage readers to reassess their own outlooks on life and, for those reading in the same postwar circumstances, reevaluate and renew their commitment to living joyfully.

In addition to encouraging readers to appreciate the freedom and beauty of life, *Mrs. Dalloway* warns against the individual tendency to protect oneself from chaos by ignoring it, and eventually losing one's ability to feel at all. Septimus was a soldier and experienced the atrocities of World War I more closely than any of the other characters in the novel. He acknowledges that his time in battle desensitized him to death and the emotional drainage that follows, but he cannot bring himself to break the habit even years after the war's end. His wife expresses concern for Septimus because she fears his lack of verbal and emotional engagement with her indicates a deeper physical issue that requires medical attention. In reality, however, he is mentally taxed and traumatized by the war in a way that cannot be reversed. Septimus recounts a moment in battle in which he narrowly escaped death as shells rained around him, a moment in which his training to

block fear and prevent cowardice kicked in so that “he watched them explode with indifference.”¹⁰ He knows that this mentality harvested in the war is not natural, and he loathes himself for being so unfeeling, especially as he relives the moment his best friend was killed right next to him: “he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst.”¹¹ Septimus’s learned attitude helped him get through the war, but such an attitude is harmful to him emotionally in looking back on his experiences and continuing to live normally in society. This case was particularly true when communicating and engaging with others, including his own wife. Septimus could no longer go about life properly in the way he had prior to the war. The temporary shutdown of his emotions became permanent, resulting in his inability to return to his prewar life. Septimus’s situation and his response to it is included in the novel as a crucial message for readers, especially those who were soldiers or involved in any kind of physically or mentally draining horrors. By highlighting the effect of the war on Septimus, Woolf not only brings awareness to and normalizes the long-term trauma and psychological stress of war felt by veterans but warns against letting this kind of mentality last longer than needed or being implemented in the first place. This underlying message demonstrates one way in which the literature that emerged during the Modernist period had the ability to speak to and positively influence readers during that same time because they related to the characters and their experiences.

The literature of the Modernist movement in England is representative of the social and political issues that stemmed from the fall of the Victorian age. The intersection of history and literature in this period is demonstrated in the poetry and prose that emerged from it, especially visible in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. Acknowledging this intertwined relationship between history and literature is crucial to understanding the nature of history’s impact on people and

¹⁰ Woolf, 86.

¹¹ Woolf, 91.

learning how to deal with conflicts in the present day. By writing this literary work during a time of such chaos and featuring that chaos in the story, Woolf guides readers of all generations—past, present, and future—to understand their reactions to the societal and global circumstances of their own time, recognize hardship as a natural and necessary part of moving forward in life, and perhaps overcome such hardship in the same way the novel’s characters overcome their own. Readers of *Mrs. Dalloway* in the twenty-first century can both learn about the history featured in the novel and realize the life lessons that Woolf conveys through her characters: Clarissa’s elevation of the mundane; Septimus’s refusal to be ignored; their mutual appreciation and love of life, despite the unfavorable historical circumstances.