

The Penetration of Virginia Woolf's Life to Her Novel *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf, as one of the best known novelist and critic, has made great achievements in the development of the “*stream of consciousness*” school of modern literature. One of her most famous representative works *Mrs. Dalloway* has vividly demonstrated the beauty and attraction of *stream of consciousness* approach of literature creation. In this novel, a great deal of elements of the author's life have been penetrated and embodied in the development of the story and the characters, represented by the family and social background, the attitude to literature, the influences of death as well as the understanding towards marriage and women. A glance at the influences of the author's own life experiences on the characters she created may help the readers to have a better understanding towards this special kind of literary works, which is usually much less conspicuous in plot.

Key words: Virginia Woolf; *Mrs. Dalloway*; *Stream of consciousness*

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INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf, as one of the best known novelists of the *stream of consciousness* school as well as a well-known critic, has made outstanding experiments on novel writing and won great recognition for her achievements. Opposing traditional novel technique and its representatives in

contemporary English literature, she made attempt at a completely new novel form characterized by *stream of consciousness*, a term originated from psychological field indicating the flux of conscious and subconscious thoughts and impressions moving in the mind at any given time independently of the person's will. Under the influence of Freud's theory of psychological analysis, Virginia abandoned the conventional usages of realistic plot structure, characterization and description in her novels as much as she could, and concentrated mainly on the characters' mental and emotional reactions to external events rather than the events themselves. Her novels became successions of “fleeting images of the external world mingled with thoughts and half-thoughts and shows of thought attached to the immediate present or moving back and forth in memory” (Liu, 1993, p.492).

1. ABOUT *MRS. DALLOWAY*

In 1925, Virginia Woolf finished and published her fourth novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. Like her other novels, she wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* also in her characteristically modernist narrative style, rejecting traditional forms of character and plot. Thus, the interest in *Mrs. Dalloway* is not so much in the stories; it does not tell an exciting story at all, as very little happens to the characters. Through describing the activities of the main character—Mrs. Dalloway, i.e. Clarissa Dalloway, in one day from the morning to the evening, the author displays for us the heroine's whole life experiences, and most importantly, the shifting and complex mental process of the subjective lives of several characters. The story begins with Clarissa Dalloway buying flowers in the morning for her party, and ends with the holding of the party which can be regarded as successful in the evening. Through the movement of consciousness, Clarissa's life is carefully connected and clearly depicted by numerous fractions during her continuous recollection and meditation which are stirred

up by the change of different sights; through the movement of consciousness, the characteristics of Clarissa's husband Richard Dalloway and her first love Peter Walsh are presented vividly so as to enable the readers to get further understanding towards the heroine—Clarissa; through the movement of consciousness, the bitter experiences of the Smiths couple—Septimus Warren Smith who suffers mentally from the First World War, and Lucrezia Warren Smith who suffers greatly from her husband's insanity, are profiled elaborately so as to put forward the novel to reach its climax and at the same time arouse the readers' attention to the destructive effects brought by the war; through the movement of consciousness, the hypocritical and vainglorious Establishment represented by the Prime Minister, Lady Bruton, Dr. Holmes as well as Sir William Bradshaw, is portrayed vividly so as to reveal the brutality and indifference of the upper class to the common people, to reflect the blind patriotism of the ignorant lower class, and to predict the destiny of the decay of the British empire.

While reading the novel, the readers seem to suffer from no urgent desire to know what happens next, as the story itself is so flat. However, when overcoming impetuosity, one may find deep and real involvement in the novel, though there is no exciting or earth-shaking plot. Readers may easily get immersed in the subjective world of the characters and undergo the mental development together with the heroine. It seems that readers also suffer with the suffering of Clarissa, and become delighted with her enjoyment in nature. And one is even quite likely to become mentally depressed and obsessed for some time during the reading process, especially by the sight of Septimus throwing himself out of the window just as the image was coming up to Clarissa when she got the news of Septimus committing suicide at the party. If one thinks *stream of consciousness* novels are nothing but simple track and record of the characters' thoughts and therefore easy to be created, it may fall out of fairness. Simple attempt to trace down one's mind for even half an hour may end up with failure, as people's mind is so complex and changeable that it keeps jumping here and there, from past to present, from one fragment to another, not to mention presenting literary development based on it. Thus, the achievement of the *stream of consciousness* novels is of special significance.

2. VIRGINIA WOOLF'S LIFE AND HER NOVEL *MRS. DALLOWAY*

Virginia has attracted quite a lot of attention in literary field for her unique style of writing and received different kinds of evaluation. A lot of negative comments have been given to her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, some of which have criticized it for lacking social significance, with concentration only on the trifles of human mind. Yet any

attentive readers may notice that Virginia has bestowed a lot of significant themes and ideas in this novel, such as sanity and insanity, life and death, cosmic time, love and beauty. Virginia struggled to combine many elements that impinged on her sensibility as she wrote the novel. The title, "Mrs. Dalloway", best suited her attempts to join them together, with all of ideas and sensations embodied through the heroine's complex and changeable mind. As Virginia commented herself, "In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticize the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense" (Woolf, 1996, Preface). As a matter of fact, this novel is closely connected with the author's life as well as the social background when she lived in. Next, a brief comparison will be made between the author's life experiences as well as time background and the plot of her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* so as to see how great influences of her life and social experiences have been brought to her writing in order to get better understanding towards the social significance of this *stream of consciousness* novel.

2.1 About the Family Background

At the very beginning, Virginia Woolf was born and grew up in a comfortable, upper-middle-class family with social connections both to artists and writers and to the social elite of judges, politicians and aristocracy. Quite acquainted with different kinds of persons from upper class, Virginia was most familiar with the vanity and spiritual barrenness of aristocracy as well as different kinds of parties, which were rather popular among upper-class families. Thus, she was able to create a series of characters from upper class as hostess-like worldly Clarissa, snobbish and superficial Hugh Whitbread, pretentious Lady Bruton, Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw. The superficiality of the members of upper-class social circle was illustrated even at the very beginning of the novel. Virginia begins the novel in her typical fashion, symbolically and methodically. Readers meet the heroine Clarissa in the first sentence, in a proclamation of independence. She would get flowers because Lucy had work to do. The proclamation is thus combined with a sense of irony because though Clarissa had chosen to handle the burden of work herself, the work only consisted of buying flowers. Thus, the underlying theme of social commentary is hinted directly with the style of tinged irony.

Actually we can see the heroine Clarissa was born and grew up in the same upper-class family as Virginia. And according to the author, Clarissa was modeled after one of her friend named Kitty Maxse, who Virginia thought to be a superficial socialite. Though she wanted to comment upon the void of the heroine and the displeasing social system, Virginia found it difficult at times to respond to a character like Clarissa. The Dalloways had been at first introduced in the author's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, but

Virginia presented the couple in a harsher light than she did in later years. Richard was described as domineering and pompous, and Clarissa dependent and superficial. But later the author discovered a greater amount of depth to the character of Clarissa Dalloway in a series of short stories, the first of which was titled, "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street", published in 1923. This short story would serve as an experimental first chapter to *Mrs. Dalloway*. A great number of similar short stories followed and soon the novel became inevitable.

While Virginia was enjoying and benefiting from her predominance upper-class family, she at the same time had realized the snobbishness of the upper class, so she created the character of Peter Walsh, who disgusted Clarissa's association with Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread, who were typically the symbol of pretentious aristocracy. He looked down upon and was irritated by Clarissa's behaving as a hostess. In his opinion, the civilized London was a metonym for Clarissa and the type of society she represented. Though Peter wanted to rebel, he could not help but yearn for inclusion within the society he tried to despise.

2.2 About the Love for Literature

In addition, there are other details which indicate the similarity between the author's family life and the heroine's in her novel. As was normal at that time Virginia, as a girl, received no formal education, but her father encouraged her to read widely. She used her father's extensive library to educate herself, and decided to follow her father to become a writer in the future. And the fond of reading books can also be detected from Clarissa. As she enjoyed the privacy in her attic room, she read late at night and got fully involved in literary works, she even "had read deep in Baron Marbot's *Memoirs*" (Woolf, 1996, p.35). Besides, during Virginia's life, her father gave her great impact, especially on self-studying and her later choice of writing career, and she stayed closer to her father. Some have even suggested that after her mother's death, Virginia may have felt guilt over choosing her father as the favorite parent and therefore, suffered greatly from mental depression. So when we read *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is not difficult to understand that only Clarissa's father is mentioned in the novel, without a hint of her mother.

2.3 About the Influence of Death

Virginia's life was deeply marked by a number of deaths in her family, which directly brought about her mental breakdowns for several times. Her beloved mother died when she was only thirteen years old, which forever destroyed the security, cheerful family life that Virginia had enjoyed until then. Her first breakdown began shortly after the death of her mother in 1895, which Virginia later described as "the greatest disaster that could have happened". Two years later, her stepsister, Stella Duckworth suddenly died after having been married for

only two months when Virginia was still obsessed by the excessive mourning caused by her mother's death. Then, in 1904, nine years after her mother's death, Virginia's most-loved father died after a long and painful illness through which he was nursed by Virginia. She then was overcome by the event and suffered her second mental breakdown, combined with scarlet fever and an attempted suicide. Two years later her brother Thoby, of whom she was very fond, suddenly died of typhoid fever, which he caught while traveling in Greece. The several deaths of her family members made her for the rest of her life, always liable to suffer from grave depression, nervous tension and physical illness. In the novel, both Clarissa and Septimus were shocked by the death of others in life, which brought great influences on their mental world. Clarissa was distressed by the death of her sister Sylvia. Having seen her own sister killed by a falling tree before her "very eyes", Clarissa became not so positive. And this "horrible affair" directly changed her attitude towards her belief; she thought there were no Gods any more, and "so she evolved this atheist's religion of doing good for the sake of goodness" (Woolf, 1996, p.87). Meanwhile, Septimus Warren Smith, who was considered as Clarissa's doppelganger, suffered from severe mental problem after his good friend, Evans, was killed in World War I. At first Septimus was glad that he felt no grief, until he realized that he had lost the ability to feel. Marrying Rezia in an attempt to move on, Septimus never regained an emotional attachment to the world. The couple moved back to London and Septimus returned to his good job, but he slowly slipped into further depths of despair and horror. He heard voices, namely of Evans, and became extremely sensitive to color and natural beauty. As a matter of fact, the madness of Septimus and his treatment at the hands of the doctors were closely based on Virginia's own experiences. A lot of illusions about Septimus experienced in the novel came from the real feeling of Virginia in her mental suffering, such as the bird singing in Greek. And Virginia's annoyance towards the handling of the mental doctors was vividly embodied in the novel by the characters' opinion towards Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, who were hated by Septimus as he felt that the doctors represented the evils of human kind trying to stifle him; by Rezia because they tried to separate her from her husband by sending her husband away from her to remain peace, and by Clarissa because they made the lives of their patients intolerable. Actually, Clarissa and Septimus, who were depicted as the dark double of the former, reflected the contradiction in Virginia's inner heart. Clarissa, with a slight tendency towards death which can be overcome by adjustment, represented the optimistic side of the author's inner mind, who enjoyed nature, loved life and found delight and courage to live through writing. Yet Septimus represented the pessimistic side of the author's personality, who wanted to escape from the mental torture and find the eternal peace through

death. Virginia struggled throughout her life against the mental breakdown, and fought continuously at the edge of death. However, she couldn't manage to get rid of the obsession of the idea of death in the end. And the death of Spetimus, the person who suffered from insanity in this novel, predicted the death of the author, who had been suffering the same mentally and drowned herself in a river near her home eventually.

2.4 About Marriage and Intimacy

Next, in the author's life, after her mother's death, she became a sexual prey of her half brother George Duckworth, who was already fourteen when Virginia was born. In the last year of her life, Virginia wrote to a friend regarding the shame she felt when, at the age of six, she was fondled by George. Similar incidents reoccurred throughout her childhood until Virginia was in her early twenties. Therefore, it seemed she had a kind of dreadful feeling towards sex; at least she took no interest in it. Even in her marriage life with Leonard Woolf, some biographers have described her relationship with her husband as a strong, caring friendship without much sexual intimacy. However, it was really a matter of fact that Woolf was the stable presence whom Virginia needed to control her moods and steady her talent. They settled down to a reasonably comfortable life. The husband gave their home a musical atmosphere, and recognized his wife's greatness as a writer and provided for her affectionate and admiring encouragement and support. When Virginia fell ill, which was quite frequent in her elder life, she was always in the care of her husband. Such kind of stability in her marriage life has greatly facilitated her writing career. Many echoes of Virginia can be seen within the character of Clarissa in her novel. The theme of the virgin, symbolizing seclusion, independence, and sexual aridity outstood from the second chapter as Clarissa returned home from the street and found relief in her attic room. From the novel, we learn that she enjoyed being alone to the extent that she had slept alone in the attic since her illness. And her relative loneliness and lack of intimacy in marriage was symbolized through the metaphor of a virginal nun, as "she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet" (Woolf, 1996, p.36) and she even wondered whether she had failed her husband. Nevertheless, Clarissa could really enjoy the kind of secure and stable life in the marriage with Richard Dalloway. Richard was deeply in love with his wife although he felt uncomfortable showing his affection to his wife. He'd even go back home with a bunch of beautiful flowers to his wife after lunch with Lady Bruton. Besides, the husband was greatly concerned with his wife and took good care of her, as we can see, even during the short time when he came home after lunch, he never forgot to take a pillow and a quilt to ensure his wife's "an hour's complete rest after luncheon" (Woolf, 1996, p.132) following the doctor's advice.

2.5 About Appreciation Towards Feminine Beauty

As a critic, Virginia advocated an ideal of female independence, space and intellectual privacy, as can be detected from her long essay *A Room of One's Own*, which was published in 1929. She admired and gave high appraisal to strong women, and she even praised highly for the beauty of female life. In her early age, when she gave self-education to herself, she admired women such as Madge Vaughan, daughter of John Addington Symonds, who wrote novels and would later be illustrated as Sally Seton in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia held a similar type of affectionate devotion for Madge at the age of fifteen as the young Clarissa held for Sally. Her admiration for strong women was coupled with a growing dislike for the male domination of society. In the novel, Sally, with whom Clarissa had gained great pleasure of life, represented Clarissa's true but unfulfilled love. As her best friend, Clarissa obtained quite a lot of entirely new things and sensations from Sally, and she even enjoyed the most impressive and exciting kiss with Sally. In the eyes of Clarissa, Sally represented the true beauty of strong female, which she appreciated intensely throughout her life. Another typical archetype which represented the feminine maternal beauty in the novel was the vagrant woman singing in the subway, who served as a vehicle to transmit readers from Peter to Rezia Smith, two characters lacking companionship. She sang of eternal love, and the feminine beauty was clearly indicated through her steadfast attitude and vigorous sound.

2.6 About the Social Background

As about the social background, in the time when Virginia Woolf lived—Victorian time, the central and unquestioned beliefs and values that people held were "empire", "civilization", "progress" and "duty". Even in the late Victorian world, it could still seem totally natural that huge areas of the earth should be ruled by Britain. The British Empire was assumed to have a civilizing and progressive mission. As we can see from the novel, Peter went to India to pursue his career and life, although he was impressed by the civility of London as compared to the Indian culture in which he had been living, as India had once been considered as the most glorious of imperial possessions. Another dramatic example which vividly illustrated people's such kind of beliefs was the explosive situation when the car passed the street as Clarissa was buying flowers. The car allowed us two specific insights into the text. On the one hand, it highlighted the emphasis of the British culture on figures and symbols. No one was sure which great figure resided within the important-looking car, but each onlooker felt touched "by magic", as Clarissa noted.

But there could be no doubt that greatness was seated within; greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand's-breadth from ordinary people who—might now, for

the first time and last, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England... (Woolf, 1996, p.19).

Traffic slowed and onlookers halted and then rushed to Buckingham Palace. The car, as with many of the objects with which Clarissa surrounded herself, was only an empty symbol. Who was inside did not matter. The shell of the car, in a postmodern sense, represented the empty significance that was often placed on social status within the world of Mrs. Dalloway's London. Just as later when the Prime Minister appeared at Clarissa's party, the crowd all knew, felt to the marrow of their bones, this majesty passing; this symbol of what they all stood for, English society. The figure of Prime Minister symbolized the hierarchy of English society and the deeply encoded sense of civility and status that still ruled the society even after the devastation of World War I. And people's admiration no matter those from lower class or upper class towards the empire never decreased or stopped. However, the author directly pointed out the blindness of such kind of patriotism and foreshadowed the destiny of the decaying of the Establishment, as was indicated in the novel, "the enduring symbol of the state" would be

known to curious antiquaries, sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth (Woolf, 1996, p.16).

On the contrary, with the coming of World War I, the order of the world had changed enormously. Millions of soldiers died in the trenches for no rational cause. For those like Virginia Woolf and her peace-loving friends, the war threw doubt on many of the central beliefs and values of ruling-class culture, especially on military values and patriotism. The war had greatly undermined the self-confidence and self-satisfaction of pre-war culture and initiated a new age of European culture, the age of skepticism. Just as the madness of Septimus in the novel were actually the result of a delayed reaction to the horrors of the war and the loss of his friend's life meaninglessly. When Septimus was young, he had fallen in love with a woman who lent him books on Shakespeare, and he became a poet. But when the war came, Septimus was one of the first volunteers for the army to the front. He went to protect Shakespeare. He became friends with his officer, Evans, who died just before the war ended. Septimus was glad that he felt no grief, until he realized that he had lost the ability to feel. As a representative of the "lost generation", a topic touched on by many of Woolf's contemporary's most noticeable literary works, Septimus suffered from delusions and hallucinations. Septimus believed that his initial emotionless reaction to Evans' death was real and progressively based his construction of reality on this miscalculation. Instead of facing his

grief, he repressed it until the remainder of his reality was shattered. The real truth was that Septimus had felt too deeply, had been too shaken and numbed by shell shock and the war, specifically by the death of his friend Evans to remain mental calmness. Yet the ruling class was still deeply absorbed in their belief of eternity and refused to admit the destructive effects that the war had brought to the culture, to the society and to the people's belief. Septimus was the victim of such psychosocial establishment in Post-War England, represented by Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, who believed there was nothing whatever the matter and that the best thing was to think of it as little as possible. As a result, the Establishment brought more harm than good for its people's recovery from the war.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the above analysis, in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, a lot of life and social factors of the time when the author lived have been penetrated in the story, and the social meaning of the novel has been embodied magnificently. The *stream of consciousness* novels really have its own social value instead of merely reflecting the change of the characters' mind. No matter Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, the *stream of consciousness* novelists have bestowed quite impressive social significance in their writings.

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