

Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway

Bi-monthly Discussion Groups (up to p. 94)

READING

Mrs. Dalloway is not as difficult to read as some other Mission Impossible novels, e.g. Joyce's Ulysses or Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. But it's not exactly an easy read. The first three questions are intended to help readers navigate the process of reading this complex, modernist novel.

1. As you are reading, can you ascertain how each of the following characters is related to either Clarissa Dalloway or Septimus Warren Smith?

Clarissa Dalloway

Richard Dalloway
Elizabeth Dalloway
Peter Walsh
Sally Seton
Hugh Whitbread
Miss Kilman

Septimus Warren Smith

Lucrezia (Rezia) Smith
Dr. Holmes
Evans

How do the many other minor, but named characters relate to the stories of these key characters?

2. Much of the novel takes place inside key characters' minds as they walk around London. How and where do these characters cross paths? You might find the map provided by the Mrs. Dalloway Mapping Project helpful in connecting character with location: <http://mrsdallowaymappingproject.weebly.com/> .

3. As the characters walk and muse, how does Woolf use objects (e.g. a car, an airplane) and sounds (e.g. the chimes of Big Ben), as well as locations (e.g. Regent's Park) to make transitions from one character's thoughts to another's?

ANALYSIS

The following questions are intended as prompts for thought and discussion.

1. What do Clarissa's morning musings reveal about her character?
 - What does the party that she is planning for the evening of this June day signify for her? More broadly, what does being a hostess mean to her? Why, once as a young woman, had she "winced all over" when Peter Walsh called her "the perfect hostess"?
 - How do Clarissa's morning musings reveal her remarkable perceptivity and her experience of "exquisite moments"?
 - How does Clarissa define her sexuality—in the past and in the present?
 - Why did the young Clarissa reject Peter Walsh's suit and prefer Richard Dalloway? How does the 52-year-old Clarissa feel about Peter Walsh?
 - Why does Clarissa hate Miss Kilman, and why does this hatred so upset her?

2. How do Peter Walsh's memories of young Clarissa and his reaction to meeting her again present Clarissa in a different light? Is Peter a perceptive reader of her character?
 - Why does Woolf describe their meeting as a "challenge" to a "battle"? How does Clarissa fear that Peter will judge her life? How does Peter fear that Clarissa will judge his life? Do they, in fact, judge each other in the expected ways?
 - How does Peter's habit of fingering his pocketknife further his characterization?
 - Why is Peter so struck by Clarissa's mere presence: "that extraordinary gift, that woman's gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be...she never said anything specially clever; there she was, however; there she was"?
 - After Clarissa rejected him, what have been Peter's subsequent relations with women?
 - How does Peter's interpretation of the interactions between Rezia and Septimus affect our evaluation of his interpretations of Clarissa's behavior and choices? More generally, what does the reader learn from

Woolf's representation of characters' perceptions of other characters' motives and actions?

3. The reader first encounters Septimus Warren Smith when a car backfires and traffic is stalled. What can we deduce about Septimus from his reaction to this sound?

- How is Rezia trying to cope with her husband's odd behavior? How does her external perspective differ from Septimus's internal musings?
- What seems to have caused Septimus's slide into madness? Is he suffering from more than what we would call PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)? Why was Woolf capable of representing his inner turmoil so vividly?
- Why does Septimus hate doctors? Why does he feel that, once he falls into their care, that he is trapped by "human nature"?
- In the preface to the 1928 edition of Mrs. Dalloway Woolf makes the rather surprising claim that Septimus is Clarissa's double.
 - What barriers separate the world of Clarissa from the world of Septimus?
 - Are there, however, points of contact in their experiences of moments of ecstatic perception, preoccupation with death, experience of same-sex bonds, and/or remembrances of Shakespeare?

4. While focusing on the daily lives of individual members of high society and the working class of London on one June day in 1923, Woolf repeatedly, if briefly, has her characters reference ENGLAND: its royalty, its government by Parliament and a Prime Minister, its recent experience of World War I, its vast colonial empire (especially India), and its long history. What do these fleeting references contribute to the novel? How do Woolf's characters understand their relation to ENGLAND?