Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

Bi-monthly Discussion Groups, p. 94 (“It was precisely twelve o’clock.”)-end

1. Septimus rejects everything that Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes stand for; similarly, Clarissa rejects Miss Kilman’s world view and is suspicious of Dr. Bradshaw. Why? What do the doctors and the history teacher have in common?

2. As she sets out in the morning to buy flowers, Clarissa asks herself “why one loves [life] so . . . making it up, building it round one . . . every moment afresh” (4). Later in the morning, as Peter leaves Clarissa’s house, he muses on her “gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be” (76). What do “life” and “making a world of her own” mean to Clarissa? What does her sense of “life” have to do with her chosen vocation as a hostess (121-22)?

3. Both Lady Bruton and Clarissa belong to London’s high society. But how do they differ in their relation to this world and in what they value? How do they differ as hostesses?

4. Why doesn’t Richard say to Clarissa, “holding out his flowers, ‘I love you’” (115)? Does it matter that he doesn’t speak his love—whereas Peter burst into tears during his earlier meeting with Clarissa?

5. Although Mrs. Dalloway recounts the lives of a limited number of interrelated characters on one June day in 1923 London, Woolf conjures up a wider world of space and time beyond the margins of the narrative. How do these references to English social structures and to expanses of space and time figure in Woolf’s project to capture this one June day?

6. *Mrs. Dalloway* includes a wide range of female characters of varying social classes, ages, and life experiences. What do we learn about women’s opportunities from the oldest women? What do we learn about women’s work during the party? What has marriage meant to Sally Seton (now Lady Rosseter), to Mrs. Bradshaw, as well as to Clarissa? How does what we would now call sexual harassment figure in Woolf’s narrative? What do we glimpse about women’s futures?

7. Woolf’s original title of *Mrs. Dalloway* was The Hours. But the theme of time extends beyond the hours chimed by Big Ben on this one day in June 1923. Is this novel, in part, about the advent of modernity? Where do we see hints of a monumental “shift,” as Peter imagines (162)? How does the past impinge on the present? Is the past, in fact, ever past?

8. Throughout the novel, thoughts of death permeate both Clarissa’s and Septimus’s ruminations. These thoughts come to a climax when Septimus and Clarissa finally “meet”—as she learns from Lady Bradshaw of his suicide and leaves her party for a moment. What does Clarissa mean when she thinks that death preserves what matters, that it is a “defiance,” an “attempt to communicate,” an “embrace” that perhaps finally reaches the “centre”? What is the “treasure” she says Septimus held when he plunged to
his death (184)? Why, as she prepares to go back to her party, does Clarissa feel glad that Septimus had “thrown [his life] away” (186)?

9. The novel’s key themes come together in the climactic scene of Clarissa’s party.

- Does the scene unite past and present into an intelligible whole, or do the moments of the characters’ lives remain fragmented and disjointed?
- How does the party scene dramatize the stratification of contemporary English society? Are meaningful connections ever formed between the strata?
- How is the party a microcosm of England and its empire?
- Is the party a success? Was it worth the trouble? What constitutes success for Clarissa as a hostess?

10. Critics often remark on the formal originality of Mrs. Dalloway. What does the narrative gain from the following formal innovations?

- Like Joyce and Faulkner, Woolf divides her narrative among a variety of consciousnesses. But unlike internal monologues in which a character muses in his/her own inner voice, Woolf’s narrative technique is more precisely termed “free indirect discourse,” a type of “third-person narration that slips in and out of characters’ consciousness” (cf. the opening of the novel). What effects does this technique—in which the narrator remains present within the internal musings of the characters—produce?
- Some critics have compared Woolf’s literary style to the innovations of Cubism in the visual arts. Why do you think modernist art is characterized by fragmentation?
- What effects do Woolf’s repetitions produce? e.g. “The leaden circles dissolved in the air” (48, 94, 186). “It is Clarissa herself” (50). “. . . there she was . . . there she was” (76). “It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was.” (194).