Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

Monthly Discussion Groups, p. 133 (“She had gone.”) – end

1. *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 (Aunt Helena Parry, Lady Bruton, Ellen Barnet, “who had been with the family for forty years” [166])?
   - What do we learn from Lucy, Agnes, and Mrs. Walker about women’s work?
   - 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 characterizations of Clarissa, Sally, Hugh Whitbread, and Peter Walsh?
   - What do we glimpse about women’s futures from Elizabeth’s brief bus ride, her relation to Mrs. Kilman, her feelings for her father Richard, and her appearance at her mother’s party?

2. Woolf’s original title of *Mrs. Dalloway* was *The Hours*, and, as we have discussed, the one day of the novel’s duration is punctuated by the chiming of Big Ben and other clocks. But the theme of time extends beyond the hours of this day in June 1923.

   - When Peter is on his way to Clarissa’s party, he thinks about how London has changed during his absence, and he intuits from “intangible things you couldn’t lay your hands on—that shift in the whole pyramidal accumulation which in his youth had seemed immovable. On top of them it had pressed; weighed them down, the women especially” (162). Is this novel, in part, about the advent of modernity? Where do we see hints of a monumental “shift”?
   - How are Clarissa’s and Peter’s memories of their shared past reprised, bringing the past into the present of her party? Is the past, in fact, ever past?

3. Throughout the novel, thoughts of death permeate both Clarissa’s and Septimus’s ruminations. In what ways is the novel a meditation on the purpose of life and the meaning of death—as social phenomena, as philosophical conundrums?

   - Immediately after the narration of Septimus’s suicide, Peter Walsh hears the ambulance that carries the body. As the vehicles move aside to let it pass, Peter muses about “the efficiency, the organization, the communal spirit of London . . . the triumph of civilization” (151). The irony is palpable. What, in fact, does Septimus’s suicide reveal about English civilization—its educational, governmental, military, and medical establishments?
   - Septimus and Clarissa finally “meet” when she learns from Lady Bradshaw of his suicide. Alone for a moment, “Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death” (183)?
     - 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)?

- What do Clarissa’s memories of quotations from Shakespeare (Othello’s exclamation about dying at the moment of greatest happiness and the repeatedly quoted elegy from Cymbeline) suggest about Clarissa’s connection to Septimus’s death?
- How do Clarissa’s antipathy to Dr. Bradshaw, her fascination with the old woman in the neighboring house, and her intuition about “forcing your soul” (184) suggest that she has “met” Septimus in some profound way, even though they have never met?
- Why, as once again “the leaden circles [of Big Ben’s chime] dissolved in the air” (186) and as she prepares to go back to her party, does Clarissa feel glad that Septimus had “thrown [his life] away”? What, in the end, does choosing to return to her party mean to Clarissa?

4. 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?