

Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway

Monthly Discussion Groups, p. 64 (“It was awful, he cried, awful, awful!”) - p. 133 (“She had gone.”)

1. Although in our last meetings we discussed Woolf’s statement that Septimus is Clarissa’s double, the issue is worth revisiting as we learn more about the characters.
  - In what ways are they each other’s opposite?
  - Can we, however, find connections in their
    - perception of beauty
    - thoughts of death
    - experience of gender expectations
    - experience of same-sex bonds
    - remembrances of Shakespeare:
      - Clarissa—“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun”? (an elegy from Cymbeline for an apparently dead princess, who later revives)
      - Septimus—Antony and Cleopatra (the tragedy of famous lovers whose passion leads to their loss of Egypt and Rome), as well as unnamed works that express disgust with sexuality (e.g. Hamlet and Sonnet 129 “Th’ expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action . . . )?
  - How does this doubling between Clarissa and Septimus bring into focus Woolf’s portrait of one June day in 1923 London?
2. Septimus rejects everything that Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes stand for; similarly, Clarissa rejects Miss Kilman’s world view. Why?
  - What do the doctors and the history teacher have in common?
  - Why does Septimus recoil from the “Human Nature” he associates with Dr. Holmes and the “Proportion” he associates with Dr. Bradshaw? Why do both Septimus and Clarissa recoil from the “Conversion” that they associate with Bradshaw and Kilman?
3. 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
    - her experiences of death
    - what Peter calls her thorough-going skepticism?
4. 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?
  - How does the reader judge them?

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, including
  - Peter Walsh's experience as part of the British Raj in India
  - Peter's encounter outside of the Regent's Park Tube station with an old beggar woman singing an ancient song, "remembering how once in some primeval May she had walked with her lover . . . this battered old woman . . . would still be there in ten million years . . . ." (81-82)
  - Richard's Parliamentary committee meetings about such topics as "the problem of the female vagrant" (116) and "the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice" (120)
  - Hugh Whitbread's duties at the royal court
  - Lady Bruton's letter urging British emigration to Canada (cf. the Empire Settlement Act of 1922).
  - How do these references further the characterization of Richard Dalloway and Peter Walsh, the important men in Clarissa's life?
  - How do these references to social structures and to expanses of space and time beyond the margins of the narrative figure in Woolf's project to capture this one June day?
  
6. How do Richard's musings expand our understanding of why Clarissa chose to reject Peter and marry Richard? 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?
  
7. 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). "It is Clarissa herself" (50). ". . . there she was . . . there she was" (76). "But he could not tell her he loved her. He held her hand. Happiness is this, he thought" (119).