

Book Review

Mrs Dalloway

by Virginia Woolf

It didn't take long to choose a book for this review. When deciding, I couldn't look past *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel set in 1920s London by Virginia Woolf – a celebrated modernist author with an extraordinary command of the English language and a fascinating insight into the human experience. Inspired by Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf explores postwar Britain over the course of a single day in this chapterless masterpiece full of colour, vitality, and sensitivity. Utilizing a stream of consciousness to reveal the plot, the novel opens with Clarissa Dalloway, a lady in her 50s with a keenness for life and connecting with others, albeit “at heart a snob”, opening her window with an ominous feeling that “something awful was about to happen” and setting out to prepare for a party that evening. The point of view is passed around London as a myriad of characters contributes with snippets of their experiences and lives on this particular summer's day.

Without revealing too much of the plot, and taking away from the delight, this novel captures the interconnectedness of our experience. Innocuous occurrences bring us together, be it the cruising blacked-out car stimulating contagious whisperings of who is inside, the shared attempts to decipher the letters being drawn in smoke by an acrobatic plane, or even attending a party. The novel is decorated with images of connecting threads, sights, and sounds. Woolf explores the difficulty of actually knowing another person without seeking out the people and places that “completed” them as she considers our lives and ourselves being influenced and influencing our interactions with the world around us. This daunting challenge leaves a more optimistic taste when it's considered that the “unseen part of us, which spreads wide,” may live on eternally.

Mrs Dalloway, as a novel, openly criticizes psychiatry and the management of mental illness in 1920s England. A primary character in the book, Septimus Warren Smith, a man “aged about thirty” who served in the First World War, reveals to us an experience of psychosis as he attempts to make sense of whisperings and the world around him. His mood fluctuates from rapture to melancholy as he deduces “scientifically” from his perceptual disturbances, much to the shame of his caring wife Lucrezia. It is not accidental that the doctors are the most negatively described characters in the novel and do more harm than good. First met is Dr Holmes, a GP that declares that “there was nothing whatever seriously the matter” with Septimus, but that he was “a little out of sorts” and “in a funk”. Septimus' difficulties are minimized with suggestions that he go to a music hall like Holmes himself did “when he felt like that”, or play a game of cricket. Portrayed as a perseverant nuisance with a brittle ego, Holmes insists on calling daily, much to Septimus' dismay, to talk more about himself and to

ask Lucrezia to tea as opposed to interacting with Septimus in any meaningful way. Enter Sir William Bradshaw, psychiatrist and well-regarded specialist in bed rest and proportion. Bradshaw at least recognizes the severity of Septimus' difficulties but with little interventions at his disposal besides admission to “a delightful home down in the country”, he alienates Septimus even further with gems such as “try to think as little about yourself as possible” and “the people we care for most are not good for us when we are ill.” A parallel is drawn between psychiatry's approach to treatment and oppressive conversion – Bradshaw “swooping” in to impress his will on “the exhausted, the friendless” whom are “naked, defenceless”. It is with irony that Sir Bradshaw's “infallible instinct” is mentioned, and psychiatry is described as an “exacting science which has to do with what, after all, we know nothing about”. It is suggested that his ability to oppress and convert earned Sir William Bradshaw the esteemed knighthood, not his ability to connect humanely with patients whom he avoided giving more than three-quarters of an hour for fear that he himself would lose proportion.

Mrs Dalloway, the novel, bombards the reader with energetic and rhythmic imagery. I left it with an enthusiasm for London and the charm offered through its parks, skyline, and bells chiming asynchronously. Virginia Woolf has an astounding ability to capture thoughts and emotions offering a realistic, relatable depth to her characters as they adapt to the present and reminisce on the past. The description of Septimus' experience is moving and captivating, and no doubt reflects in some part Woolf's own contact with psychiatry of the time. It took a few pages for me to orientate to her style of writing and the stream of consciousness implemented, who is saying or thinking what, but I cannot recommend this book enough to anyone that has an interest in life or even the English language. Aware that this review is being written for a psychiatry audience, I feel the novel offers a warning of the impact that our clinical encounters can have. It illuminates the importance of connecting with patients as people, listening and doing our best to understand their experience, respecting, and empathizing.

Mrs Dalloway highlights the potential of a second, the capacity of a small amount of time for an enormous amount of activity. I've deliberately tiptoed around dramatic moments to preserve suspense for anyone that goes on to read it, but I can assure you that it wasn't an uneventful day.

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Reviewed by James O'Donoghue
University College Cork, Cork, Ireland
(Email: jamesodonoghue4@gmail.com)