

Mrs. Dalloway through the Lens of Freud

“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.”¹ In this opening sentence to Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, the main character’s defense against the instinctual death drive as envisioned by Freud is on display. Under the guise of helping her maid prepare for the evening’s party, Clarissa offers to run the errand but getting out into the bustle of the city where she chats up shopkeepers, runs into acquaintances is one way she defends against the frustration of annihilating repressed desire. At the same time, the errand is in service to the upcoming festivities, a similar means of diversion only on a grander scale. Simply put, Clarissa has fashioned a life around distraction, but news of a stranger’s suicide will pierce her defenses and bring her closer to self destruction.

Unlike happiness, Freud claims “unhappiness is much less difficult to experience,” that man is “threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body...doomed to decay...; from the external world, which may rage against us...; and from our relations to other men.”² When we meet Clarissa she is at the mercy of all three. Bodily she feels herself “...shriveled, aged, breastless.”³ The violent explosion

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 26.

² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Germany: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag Wien, 1930), 15.

³ Woolf, 26.

from a motor car which "...made Mrs. Dalloway jump..."⁴ is redolent of the recently-ended war and her most seminal relationships, that of her husband Richard, ex Peter and "friend" Sally are respectively tepid, contentious and unrealized.

Upon returning home Clarissa withdraws to an upstairs room in which, after her illness, her husband insists she rest undisturbed. "So the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading...she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth...—for example on the river beneath the woods...when, through some contraction of this cold spirit, she had failed [her husband.] And then in Constantinople, again and again..." and "yet she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman..." when "she did undoubtedly feel what men felt."⁵ Woolf elaborates on Clarissa's experience using language that all but describes female orgasm: "expansion... quivered...swollen...pressure...rapture...gushed..." concluding with, "she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus..."⁶ Such thoughts take Clarissa back to her first meeting with Sally Seton. "...all that evening she could not take her eyes off Sally... an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired...Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life...Sally...kissed her on the lips...And she felt she had been given a present—a diamond, something infinitely precious...The others disappeared and there she was alone with Sally."⁷ Clarissa is smitten, but there's a catch—the year is

⁴ Woolf, 11.

⁵ Woolf, 27.

⁶ Woolf, 27.

⁷ Woolf, 28-31.

1923. Embarking on a lesbian affair would put her far ahead of her time not to mention precariously outside her comfort zone. Fearful, overwhelmed Clarissa opts for a life devoid of physical passion but she will pay a price as the "...struggle between the interest of self-preservation and the demands of the libido...comes at the price of severe sufferings and renunciations."⁸ She does not pursue anything further with Sally, ends her tumultuous relationship with Peter, a man "...with whom everything had to be shared"⁹ and marries socially acceptable, dependable and undemanding Richard Dalloway, a man with whom she can keep her physical and emotional distance for as Clarissa says, "in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out...which Richard gave her, and she him."¹⁰

In an effort to sublimate her libidinal instincts, to calm "...the terror; the overwhelming incapacity..."¹¹ her "...perpetual sense...of being...far out to sea and alone..."¹² Clarissa throws her energy into entertaining, a pastime both Richard and Peter denigrate. "Both of them had criticized her unfairly, laughed at her very unjustly, for her parties...Well, how was she going to defend herself?"¹³ From Freud's perspective, Clarissa already has defended herself, against her taboo libidinal desires by

⁸ Freud, 43.

⁹ Woolf, 5.

¹⁰ Woolf, 5.

¹¹ Woolf, 168.

¹² Woolf, 6.

¹³ Woolf, 109.

filling her days with the myriad details that party-throwing requires: "...the beautiful silver, the brass fire-irons, the new chair covers, and the curtains of yellow chintz...the plates, saucepans, cullenders, frying-pans, chicken in aspic, ice-cream freezers, pared crusts of bread, lemons, soup tureens, and pudding basins..."¹⁴ Unaware of what drives her, what she's avoiding, Clarissa tries to explain what this frenzy of activity means to her, this party-giving but comes up short. "They're an offering; which sounded horribly vague...an offering to combine, to create; but to whom? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift."¹⁵ But Freud cautions that this effort to redirect one's attention is fraught. "...one can try to re-create the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one's wishes. But whoever, in desperate defiance sets out upon this path to happiness will as a rule attain nothing. Reality is too strong for him. He becomes a madman..."¹⁶ Almost as proof, Clarissa later adds, "'This is what I have made of [life]! This!' And what had she made of it? What indeed? sitting there sewing this morning with Peter."¹⁷

After much planning and preparation, party invitees arrive including a surprise guest. "Sally Seton! after all these years...[Clarissa] cried, kindling all over with

¹⁴ Woolf, 149-150.

¹⁵ Woolf, 110.

¹⁶ Freud, 18.

¹⁷ Woolf, 37.

pleasure at the thought of the past.”¹⁸ Thirty some-odd years later Clarissa still burns for Sally. Her striving for an aesthetic ideal of perfection and order have offered little protection against the threat of suffering.¹⁹

Then just as the party is in full swing Clarissa learns of a stranger’s suicide, a shell-shocked war victim who had thrown himself from a window. “Oh! thought [she,] in the middle of my party, here’s death...”²⁰ Like that left behind by a dog not-yet-housebroken there death sat, stinking in the middle of her creation, this curated illusion designed to stave off intrusive thoughts, if only for an evening. News of the stranger’s death pierces her defenses: “A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party...He had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first.”²¹ This use of “always” implies ritual ideation. Clarissa imagines the act. “She walked to the window...She parted the curtains...She felt somehow very much like him—the young man who had killed himself.”²² And they are very much alike as both share a love of Shakespeare, appreciation of beauty, repressed homosexual desire, denial of loss and perhaps mental illness. This stranger is for Clarissa a sort of literary id, an embodied view of her interiority, her conflicts and perhaps a clue to a devastating resolution. As she perseverates the clock strikes, bringing her back to the present, to the

¹⁸ Woolf, 155-156.

¹⁹ Freud, 19.

²⁰ Woolf, 166.

²¹ Woolf, 167.

²² Woolf, 168-169.

party where all in attendance have come to help stage her theatrical alternative to reality. She tells herself "...she must go back. She must assemble."²³ This act of assembling, of reestablishing herself as separate from the stranger, of rejoining the party is her way of backing away, once again, from the window.

Woolf cuts away from Clarissa to Sally and Peter sitting on a sofa together, commenting on the crowd, all the time wondering where Clarissa has disappeared to. The reader wonders, too—has she gone to join the stranger? Sally leaves Peter to speak with Richard. "'I will come,' said Peter, but he sat on for a moment...What is it that fills me with this extraordinary excitement. It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was."²⁴

Woolf ends the novel in Peter's point of view therefore once Clarissa returns the reader is no longer privy to her thoughts, her state-of-mind. Yes, she passed by the window...for now. Yes, she assembled...this time. But with the news of the stranger's suicide something has shifted. She is one step closer to her own annihilation. As Freud says, "Just as satisfaction of instinct spells happiness for us, so severe suffering is caused to us if the external world lets us starve, if it refuses to sate our needs."²⁵ Clarissa has engineered an as-if reality, one where she appears whole, satisfied, in control of her repressed desires claiming, "no one in the whole world would know how she had loved

²³ Woolf, 169.

²⁴ Woolf, 177.

²⁵ Freud, 16.

it all..."²⁶ because, one might posit, no one in the world truly knows Clarissa, not even herself.

²⁶ Woolf, 110.