

A Thematic Exploration of Connection in Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract: The title character has long been a focus in the interpretation of the main theme in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, that is, a connection of fragments and divergences. This paper examines the shifting characters' points of view in the presentation of Clarissa's relationship with Richard Dalloway and Peter Walsh; then a tentative conclusion will be drawn that though intimate the main characters appear, they stay far in the minds. And such a psychological and emotional remoteness of these characters in relation to another might be a reflection of Woolf's skeptical attitude toward the definiteness of connection in a modern world.

1. Introduction

Though the themes in *Mrs. Dalloway* are many and varied, the master theme can be detected from the impressive plea "Communication is health and happiness" (Woolf 104), that is, a connection of fragments and divergences. And the title character has long been the focus in the interpretation of the theme of the novel. Character Mrs. Dalloway's life is thought to be "a triumph with all its perfume and charm because she is in harmony with her world" (Dowling 147). Likewise, Clarissa is considered to be "an existential heroine who transcends the constraints of gender, class, and hierarchy" (Ruotolo 99). However, a tentative conclusion is drawn that though intimate and harmonious the main characters appear, they stay far and remote in the minds and souls by focusing on shifting characters' presentation of Clarissa's relationship with Richard Dalloway and Peter Walsh.

2. Connection and Disconnection

Point of view is a perspective or stance and can be understood from literal, figurative and transferred senses which relate correspondingly to the physical place, ideological situation and interest-vantage to which narrative events stand in relation. Thus, point of view is subdivided into perceptual, conceptual; and interest point of view.(Chatman 151-153). By this definition, I would focus on character's quite different conceptual points of view on each other and on the same events so as to explore Mrs. Dalloway's respective relationships with Richard Dalloway and Peter Walsh .To begin with, readers learn from Mrs. Dalloway's own thought at the sight of the jewelry store that Mrs. Dalloway loves "the paste and diamonds" and she has "an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it, since her people were courtiers once in the time of the Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give party" (Woolf 7). Here, the pronoun "it" precisely refers to "lovely old sea-green brooches" arrayed in the jewelry shopping window, and the words "kindle and illuminate" deliver a sense of a diamond's dazzlingly splendor Mrs. Dalloway imagines in her own mind. In contrast, when seeing Hugh's buying necklaces for his wife, Richard Dalloway thinks that his wife seems not like any jewel since in his memories he "has never sent Clarissa a jewel; except a bracelet that she never wears it"(Woolf 126). In the heart of Richard, buying such jewels as necklace for wife is "worthless" in the life but for Clarissa, she has a born passion for jewelries since they are associated with a sense of brilliance and befits her well in the grandeur of her loved social gatherings. Then go their different thoughts on parties. Richard is a bit puzzled over Clarissa's excessive concern about her parties and believes it 'foolish of her to like excitement and it was childish'; while in Clarissa's mind, party is an "offering, to combine and to create" (Woolf 134-5).For Clarissa, it is unbearably despairing to see people live in segments and

fragments which prompts her to do her task in bringing them together and in “mitigating the sufferings of her fellow-prisoners” (Woolf 86). Further, the impression is reinforced later that there seems to be an invisible disconnection in their relationship and a subtle barrier to a real communication of their souls and emotions. When being told of Peter Walsh’s return to London from India, Richard has a sudden impulse to express his feelings about his wife Clarissa since he recollects in the mind that “for years had they not spoken of their affections for each other”. In his momentary brooding on their relationship in the past years, Richard finds it hard for him to “know her, *except in starts*, as at luncheon, when he saw her quite *distinctly*; their whole life.” (Woolf 127) The italicized words deliver a message that however unified they are as husband and wife, Richard Dalloway, on rare occasion, grasps a full and clear understanding of Mrs. Dalloway and their whole marital life. Ironically, in the similar way, the correctness of rejecting Peter and taking Richard as her husband is reassured in the minds of Mrs. Dalloway over and over again. This, to some extent, is a reflection of doubt and uncertainty of Mrs. Dalloway towards her own emotional responses to these two men. And it is justifiable for readers make a judgment that their relationship reads nothing more than a simple sort of life companionship in which they live near and harmoniously in the superficial sense yet far and separated for a lack of communication between souls.

In contrast to the psychological and emotional remoteness in Mrs. Dalloway’s relationship with her daughter and husband, the relationship between Mrs. Dalloway and Peter Walsh is represented rather complicated and contradictive through their conceptual points of view on each other either in their utterances or in their minds. In the eyes of Mrs. Dalloway, Peter Walsh is a very charming, adventurous and intelligent man with ideas about everything. And they used to walk miles across the country and “all the time they discuss poetry, people and politics” (170). She enjoys her hearty laugh with him, and she also suffers greatly for his critical remarks on her weakness and inconsideration of her inner feelings. Her passionate love for Peter makes her painful “like an arrow sticking in her heart” (Woolf 10), when she is told that Peter marries a woman else. The old passion for Peter Walsh is even aroused in her deep heart when Mrs. Dalloway sits together with Peter who has just returned from India, which is represented through Mrs. Dalloway’s emotional impulse at that moment “If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine day!... Take me with you!” (Woolf 52). On the other hand, from the inner conceptual point of view of Mrs. Clarissa, Peter is so demanding in their love that “with Peter everything has to be shared”(Woolf 10), which is the primary reason for her objection of him since in her mind, a little independence should remain intact even between husband and wife. In addition, Peter is a man with “silly unconventionality, lack of the ghost of a notion what anyone else is feeling”, which annoys her so much that she could not help thinking that “Thank Heaven she had refused to marry him!” (Woolf 52). The word “silly”, the phrases “the ghost of” and “Thank Heaven” deliver a strong sense of negation in Mrs. Dalloway’s responses to Peter’s self-centeredness and obtuseness to feelings. From the flow of Peter’s recollections, readers also sense a complicated feeling Peter holds about his relationship with Clarissa. For one part, Peter is greatly attracted by Clarissa’s natural gift in making a sound judgment on people, by her extraordinary ability in making a world of her own wherever she is. Further, in the eyes of Peter, they have something in common: their vigorous love of life. Both of them are fond of “exploring the Caledonian market”, of “making stories and theories of scenes, names, people”, and both are so “susceptible” that they are easily moved, “now in despair, now in the best of their spirits”(Woolf 167). What’s more, Peter believes there is an “exquisite intimacy” between them and a “queer power to communicating without words” (Woolf 67). They can go in and out of each other’s mind without any effort and they always see through each other. Thus, a tacit understanding and shared youthful spirit draw them so close that Peter feels heart-broken and overcome with grief when Clarissa refuses him and choose Richard as her life companion. And when he recalls the “terrible” scene of parting, Peter still feels hurt in thinking that “Clarissa has sapped something in him permanently” (Woolf 175) The word “sap” gives reader a sense of total destruction, and the word “permanently” implies that the destruction is perpetually painful for Peter who will never regain from the lost love. For another part, from the inner conceptual point of Peter Walsh, readers learn to know that Peter seems to be also frustrated by their relationship even they

get on well with each other. When Clarissa leaves the hall with great anger at the talk of a man who has married his housemaid, Peter knows her anger but sits there, without saying anything. Instead, Peter becomes extremely depressed in thinking that it is all useless in “going on being in love; going on quarrelling; going on making it up” (67). Such a gloomy thought of their love even emerges in his mind when Peter enjoys the “perfect happiness” in rowing the boat with Clarissa. He is enchanted by her tender voice, her hearty laugh, and by her adventurous spirit. And he feels happy for all the night since there is a wonderful intimacy between his soul and Clarissa’s. But then when it is over, Peter says to himself, “she will marry that man” (Woolf 71). Here, the words “that man” refers to Richard Dalloway who spends the night with them but says nothing. Peter feels by instinct that Clarissa and Richard fall in love. Following the flow of his inner thought, readers find that his uncertainty about his relationship with Clarissa might derive from his sensitive understanding of different conceptions of life. Though both have a passionate love of life, Peter wants to live in a natural, sincere way and “sufficient to be himself” (74). He loves to experience his life in “journeys, rides, quarrels, adventures, bridge parties and work” (Woolf 49) and hates the smugness, hypocrisy and snobbery in life. While, in his eyes, Clarissa is “worldly” caring too much for rank, society and success; and she is insincere in “talking nonsense, saying things that she didn’t mean in the incessant parties” (Woolf 87). The words “nonsense” and “incessant” reflect the strong negative attitude held by Peter towards the insincerity and worldliness of Clarissa. The paradoxical feelings of attraction and rejection in Clarissa and Peter are best illustrated in the last scene of the novel. At the sight of Clarissa’s welcoming each guest, Peter in his mind repeats his old comments on her insincerity at the parties and believes that “it was *a great mistake* to have come. He *should have* stayed at home and *read his books*, *should have gone to a music hall*” (Woolf 184). The italicized parts in the quotation above deliver a strong and distinct repulsion of Peter at the hollowness of Clarissa’s party. While, in the meantime, readers are privileged with the access to the inner thought of Clarissa’s attitude towards Peter.

She could see Peter *out of the tail of her eye*, criticizing her, there, in that corner./why, after all, did she do these things? Why seek pinnacles and strand drenched in fire? /Might it consume her anyhow! Burn her to cinders! Better anything, better brandish one’s torch and hurl it to earth than taper and dwindle away like some Ellie Henderson! /It’s extraordinary how Peter put her into these states just by coming and standing in a corner. He made her see herself; exaggerate. It was idiotic. /But why did he come, then, merely to criticize? Why always take, never give? /There he was wandering off, and she must have speak to her(Woolf 184)

In order to have a better understanding of Clarissa’s inner thought, I divided this paragraph into six thought groups according to her complicated feelings at the moment. The italicized phrase in the first sentence implies that Clarissa does care much for Peter and she subconsciously wants to know what he is doing. And the first sentence, together with the fourth sentence, delivers a sense of tacit understanding of each other: she knows what Peter thinks about her and she thinks that he does see her through. The second and fifth sentences reflect Clarissa’s puzzlement and bitter complaints over Peter’s insouciant criticism on her. And the third sentence sounds more like her defense for herself against Peter’s reproach, that is, she would rather live a painful yet brilliant life than leads an obscure and vegetative life as Ellie Henderson (here I want to add that Clarissa does not know that Peter actually does not care much about social rank as she does; and in fact Peter thinks of her as a snob since Clarissa ignores Ellie Henderson for all the night, anyhow, they are cousins). The last sentence echoes with the frequent questions raised by Peter Walsh when the party is nearly over “But where is Clarissa? All the time?” (Woolf 209). These seem to show that both have an inner desire to have an exchange with the other. But the fact is that they have not had a word with each other all the evening. In short, the paradoxical feelings held by Clarissa and Peter make them feel attracted yet repelled, closest yet remotest to each other.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, consistent shifts in these three characters’ conceptual points of view does not only provides readers a broad and various information about them, but also enable readers to find their

emotional responses' to each other and the same events, which produce a strong impression that however intimate and harmonious they look they stay far and remote in the minds and souls. And such a psychological and emotional remoteness of these characters in relation to another might be the expression of an ambiguous stance of Woolf towards the definiteness of connection in a modern binary world.

References

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