

On *Mrs. Dalloway*

Despite Clarissa Dalloway's constant endeavor to throw herself fully into life in the present, she is constantly bothered by the past – whether her possible regret over denying Peter Walsh, her occasional unsureness about Richard, or her constant return to her kiss with Sally. I think *Mrs. Dalloway* is all about being hung-up on the past. The three main characters are all subject to some sort of hauntings from their past: Clarissa, Peter, and the literal hauntings in the case of Septimus Smith. For Clarissa, her relationship with Sally – the kiss in particular, which she calls “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” – has affected her in such a way that, even while she is not reflecting on it, the moment impacts her daily thoughts and activities (Woolf 35). Her hang-ups concerning this moment prevent her from ever being able to experience life like she did at that moment. The only thing that can remove this barrier is a moment even more powerful than the kiss; this comes in the form of Septimus' suicide and her metaphysical death.

In *Temporality of the Kiss in "Mrs. Dalloway" and "The Hours,"* Kate Haffey challenges beliefs that the kiss between Clarissa and Sally was simply part of a phase that comes with adolescence. She describes this moment as a temporal, lyric, or queer moment: a moment that never really ends (Haffey 144). It is a moment for Clarissa that “is able to transcend the divide between her adolescent and adult selves” (144). There are many moments like this in *Mrs. Dalloway*; much of the book is Clarissa being in a state of both past and present, yet this is the moment she claims as “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” (Woolf 35). Sally was the one person she actually gave her all to; she confided in Sally in a way she did with no one else. Her feelings for Sally are not matched by any until she has another temporal moment that is equally as powerful. I feel

that Sally's kiss is not the only temporal moment in *Mrs. Dalloway*: the suicide of Septimus seems to be a moment that changes the way the kiss affected her. At this point I feel she is able to give herself to Richard in a whole new way, even possible more so than she did with Sally. This moment seems like a rebirth.

While I believe that Clarissa was in love with Sally, she was more in love with the idea of Sally – or at least the way Sally made her feel. Even thinking about Sally brings back “the old feeling” (34). She was already feeling this way before the kiss, yet the temporal moment when Sally “stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips” is what constantly affects her (35). During this time, Clarissa did not fear death; she felt she was completely happy and could die with no regrets. The moment affects her so much because she no longer feels this way; she fears death. She no longer sees life as something fulfilled. She now has “the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.” (8). She seems to try to give herself to life in an attempt to restore the free feeling she had with Sally.

These thoughts of her time with Sally gave her a temporary version of the feelings she used to have; the feeling distracts from the lesser important cares she has in the present. An example of this occurs when she becomes depressed after the news of Richard's lunch with Lady Bruton. Thoughts of trivial lunch dates dissipate, as she is enthralled in her memories of first meeting Sally through memories of the kiss. Her time with Sally can be called temporal, because, when Clarissa thinks about it, it is as if she is 19 again – it melds seamlessly with the present.

Clarissa's relationship with her husband Richard is affected by her clinginess to her time with Sally. She feels that she can never give herself to someone in the way she did with Sally; she is fearful of it. She gives herself fully to life to try to feel that way

again but is unable to do it with another person. In fact, I think she is desperate to be able to connect with another person again. She is unsuccessful with Richard and wonders if her life would have been different if she had chosen Peter. She even thinks “take me with you” while talking to him (46). She wonders how she would feel if she “had lived a lifetime in them [acts of her life] and had run away, had lives with Peter” (46). These tendrils of her regret do not occur because she still loves him, but mainly because she wished she had at least given it a try – maybe she could have given herself fully to him.

This does not mean that she does not love Richard. Peter sees how she loves him; she treats him Richard differently than other men, even different than how she treats Sally. Her actions towards him are “something maternal; something gentle” (60); and Peter sees that as “Dalloway was falling in love with her; she was falling in love with Dalloway” (61). This goes to show that the way Sally made Clarissa feel was not just a symptom of being in love; if it were, Clarissa would feel the same when she’s with Richard – she would be able to give herself fully to him. The way Sally makes her feel is something unique from just being in love. It originates from “the wild, the daring, the romantic Sally” (71). She had a very freeing and positive outlook on life and that transferred to Clarissa.

I believe seeing Sally at the party begins a sort of transformation in Clarissa. She is disillusioned a bit when she realizes how Sally has changed. Peter foreshadows this earlier saying she was “the last person in the world one would have expected to marry a rich man and live in a large house near Manchester” (70-71). Sally was no longer the young, beautiful girl she once was; “the lustre had gone out of her... older, happier, less lovely” (167). Clarissa no longer felt as if Sally and her were the only ones in the room; there was no “indifference of other people” (34). This is not the lyric moment that

changes Clarissa, but it may soften her up a bit to be affected by the big lyric moment: the suicide of Septimus.

Once Clarissa heard of his suicide “the party’s splendour fell to the floor” (179). Clarissa is stripped to nothing in a very Lear-like act. She begins to experience a sort of metaphysical death: “her body went through it first... her dress flamed, her body burnt” (179). She wonders, “had he plunged holding his treasure?” (180). I believe “treasure” is referring to happiness. Septimus would have rather kept his happiness and died, than give it up and live; he died happy. During Clarissa’s time with Sally she had felt this, and now she sees an incredibly powerful example of that feeling. Once she goes through this death, she realizes that she no longer has to fear death; she is able to feel like she had with Sally – feel it constantly.

The suicide of Septimus makes her appreciate the life she had to a whole new level. She has always been one to plunge into life in the present; this disconnection from the past may be what allows her to give herself even more to the present – even more to life itself. She loses that constant fear that she had; she no longer fears “the heat of the sun” (182). Septimus also did something else to her; “he made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (182). I think “beauty” is referring to the beauty in life, the beauty in her marriage, and the beauty in her family. I find it interesting that at the same time Clarissa “feel[s] the beauty,” Richard is seeing – for what seems to be the first time – how “lovely” their daughter Elizabeth is. They are both seeing the beauty in what they have together; it almost seems there is some sort of connection between Clarissa and her husband.

I think the “fun” connects back to her time in Bourton. She frequently reminisces the fun times they had together – not just her and Sally but also with Peter. She may now be realizing the fun she can have with Richard and Elizabeth in their current life together.

She loses that attachment to that past moment, and it seems her heart automatically changes. She suddenly feels incredibly fond of Richard in a way I do not believe she has felt. “She had never been so happy,” and after her metaphysical death she realizes “it was due to Richard” (181). She even claims, “no pleasure could equal” the way she felt with him. To me, this is her rebuttal to her earlier claims about Sally’s kiss being “the most exquisite moment” (35). This is evidence that Clarissa is now able to give herself to Richard as she did to Sally but to an exalted level.

Septimus’ suicide was a more powerful lyric moment than Sally’s kiss ever could have been, giving Clarissa a readiness and acceptance of death that she had not had since her time spent with Sally. The metaphysical death she endures shows her the beauty in her life and in life in general. It makes her feel proud of her life, taking away that fear of death. This change allowed for a disconnection with this part of her past, revealing how beautiful her current life is. She always gave herself fully to life, yet, because of her inhibitions to giving herself to another person, she has never been able to fully connect with Richard. This second lyric moment allows her to have a constant feeling of giving herself to life at the same time as she gives herself to Richard.

Works Cited

- Haffey, Kate. "The Temporality of the Kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*." *Narrative* 18.2 (2010) : 137-162. Web. 27 April 2015.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. NY, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2005. Print.