Conformity, Conversion, and Death at the Party: An Analysis of The Beast of Human Nature and the Issue of Ignorance in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* offers a look at a day in the life of a cast of characters in 1923 London, a London still very much living in the shadow of the First World War. Five years from the end of the war, five years which, Peter Walsh acknowledges, have been "somehow very important," death and violence still linger over London society (Woolf 51). For some characters, like the shell-shocked Septimus Smith and his wife Rezia, the brutal consequences of warfare are an everyday nightmare. Other characters, like Clarissa Dalloway and Peter Walsh, are able to turn a blind eye to the societal vices that lead to war and attack its own people at home. By constantly switching perspectives between characters, Woolf displays how these characters live in very different realities though they go through the same day in the same city. A day that ends in suicide for one and a party for the other. It examines the tragedy of war from a post-war perspective, presenting a society ill-equipped to deal with war's survivors, a society suffering and losing its grip on its idealistic facade. It presents humanity as the perpetuator and the victim of society's desire to convert, conform, and cover-up, to drain the soul of individuality and replace it with a reflection of society's bloated and idealized view of itself. At the forefront of this plot lies the damage perpetuated by willful ignorance, by characters who sit in a place of privilege and are able to look away from the brutal aspects of human nature that eventually drive Septimus to his death. By presenting Septimus's and Mrs. Dalloway's days and situations against one another, showing that, though their physical worlds are similar, they live in entirely different realities, Woolf delivers a censure of a society unwilling to unmask itself and look upon its true face, a society content at choosing to live in a reality of comfort and parties, to

ignore the suffering that exists on the battlefield and in the streets, so long as it does not enter into their homes.

Septimus identifies "human nature" as his greatest enemy, as the cause of his pain and the hunter at his back, and he identifies Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw as the footsoldiers of human nature, the ambassadors for a society that ultimately drives Septimus to his death. He refers to human nature as a "repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils" and claims that it is "on him," that "Holmes [is] on him" (Woolf 66). In claiming that human nature is hunting him, Septimus expresses a disillusionment with a society that he supposedly fights a war to preserve, and in placing the moniker of human nature on his doctor's shoulders, he diagnoses their malpractice as a larger symptom of a society filled with death, both in and outside of war. If Septimus feels human nature and society are now his enemies, then what does he fight for in the war? He goes to war "to save an England which [consists] almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square," but this England does not exist when he returns, and he questions if it ever really existed at all (Woolf 61).

Septimus goes to war to save an ideal, to save a facade that crumbles around him and around itself with the death of Evans, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of young men on the battlefield, and the death of Septimus and many more back home. In fighting for Shakespeare, Septimus fights for his country as it presents itself on a stage. He fights with patriotic pride to preserve a dream and a history that he does not fully understand. In fighting for Miss Isabel Pole he fights for love and beauty. He fights for that green dress, which is, in effect, the same green dress that Mrs. Dalloway wears to her party. He fights for a castle on a hill that he will never have a seat in, and whose walls have already begun to crumble. Just as when Septimus stands in front of the car at

the beginning of the novel, he knows that he stands for “a purpose,” but he cannot determine what it truly is (Woolf 12). He stands in front of the car and believes “it is [he] who [is] blocking the way,” placing the entire weight of the traffic jam on himself, when in reality it is the car, it is society, that blocks the way. While everyone else stands in awe, wondering who could be in the car, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Queen perhaps, Septimus only sees the issue of halted traffic, and it locks him in place like a weight. The other characters still hold onto the idea of the ideal British society that Septimus fought for, but Septimus has gone to war. He has seen death and violence on a grand scale, and he has pulled back the curtain of the car and found it to be empty. The car does not matter to Septimus, he only sees the impediment, the barrier to himself and to others that it presents. The mask of the ideal society has been removed to reveal the face of death, and it now hunts Septimus through men like Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw.

The violence that Septimus encounters back home is very different from that which he takes part in on the battlefield. Whereas in war Septimus witnesses the destruction of the body, back in London he fights a battle against the destruction of his soul. He fights against Holmes and Bradshaw, and the “sense of proportion” that serves as the symbolic battle cry for the destruction of the individual and of the very soul of society (Woolf 69). When Sir William Bradshaw attempts to commend Septimus on his distinction in the war, Septimus can only respond by saying that he has committed “a crime” (Woolf 69). Septimus acknowledges his participation in the great crime of war, but society, formerly his accomplice in this crime, now turns its back on him and seeks to erase him for this acknowledgement, for his refusal to move on from, and even celebrate, his crime. Society is the criminal, the authority, and the executioner from

Septimus's point of view, and this all comes about through men like Sir William Bradshaw and his "sense of proportion." Bradshaw, and Rezia for that matter, cannot accept Septimus's declaration of having committed a crime. To Bradshaw, this is Septimus's true illness, not his illusions or his seizures, but his refusal to conform with larger society. Bradshaw desires that everyone, from his wife to his patients, see the world as he does. The only healthy view is his view, and any other requires a correction as a matter of health, and, more importantly "a question of law" (Woolf 69). Men like Peter Walsh still hold "pride in England," still believe in the Queen sitting behind the curtain of the car (Woolf 40). Septimus no longer can believe in this, and Bradshaw condemns him for it. This is the "human nature" that Septimus fears, a devouring force that wishes all to convert, all to conform. It wishes to blot out the individual candlelight of Septimus's soul in favor of the blinding searchlight of society.

In the end, society both wins and loses its battle against Septimus. He refuses to conform; he would rather destroy his body than allow human nature to destroy his soul, and so he kills himself. This act represents agency and individuality in his life that confuses and disgusts Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, who call him a "coward" because Septimus refuses to do what is expected of him, to fill what society considers to be his role (Woolf 106). He destroys his body so as to save himself from being incorporated into an even larger destruction, the systematic violence of war abroad and conformity at home propagated by society. Not only does Septimus's suicide save his soul, but it also opens Rezia's eyes to the Dr. Holmes that Septimus has always seen: the "large outline of his body standing dark against the window," consuming "the gold spot which went round the wall," devouring all individual light, all those who can no longer fight for Shakespeare and green dresses (Woolf 99, 107).

Through Septimus's eyes, the reader sees an example of someone who has lost their idealist view of society, but Woolf also shows how the vast majority of characters in her novel are still sheltered from the death and destruction that destroys the Smith's lives. Peter Walsh is one such character who often acts as a direct contrast to the Smith's experiences, crossing paths with them knowingly and unknowingly. He often expresses his satisfaction with British society, a society he views as healthy, civilized, and welcoming, the exact antithesis of the beast that forces Septimus to leap from his window. The most striking example of this occurs when Peter witnesses the ambulance carrying away Septimus's body, a body so mangled that Dr. Holmes does not even allow Rezia to see it. Walsh views the ambulance as "one of the triumphs of civilization," marveling at the innovation and care that he believes saves lives (Woolf 107). Walsh mistakes Septimus's murderer for his savior, and exemplifies the greatest enabler of society and its crimes: ignorance. Most of the characters in the novel refuse to pull back the curtain, to open the ambulance doors and see human nature's morbid handiwork. They are content living sheltered lives, allowing society and reality to exist as it does in their head.

By giving the reader many different character's perspectives, Woolf displays how reality exists in a plurality. Each character has their own reality, and they are each fully real and fully valid for that character. There is no singular reality that serves as some great truth. There are multiple realities that overlap and intersect but never completely align, and each of these realities hinges around the character's relationship with society. Septimus's view of ideal society is ripped away from him, but the more privileged characters in the novel still hold onto their comfortable reality. They have no wish or incentive to change their reality.

Woolf displays this chasm between the reality of the Dalloways and the other characters implicitly through their actions and in how different their days are, often showing events that happen simultaneously for the characters. As Septimus and Rezia walk to Sir William Bradshaw's house to attempt to fix the irreparable damage that the war inflicts on Septimus, Mrs. Dalloway stands in her window and mends her dress, that dress that Septimus goes to war for and finds utterly meaningless upon return. Mrs. Dalloway still believes in the power of that green dress, she still insulates herself in her safe, idealistic view of society. She is aware of the discontent in her life, of the sadness and regret that she feels when she looks back on the past, of the moments when "she suddenly feel[s], for no reason that she [can] discover, desperately unhappy," but in these moments, she chooses to fix the green dress and keep herself busy preparing for her parties (Woolf 86). She allows the beautiful front of her life to live on. People like Septimus and Rezia do not have the luxury of such a decision. At the same time, Hugh and Richard have lunch with Lady Bruton, and all three sit in a place of privilege, isolated from the other characters and society. They talk about politics as a hobby, as a topic of interest rather than of one of monumental importance, and it takes the shape of an enjoyable chat, of a nice lunch with friends. These characters all allow themselves to live in this bubble, this safe reality that their status affords them.

This safe reality that the novel's privileged characters inhabit manifests itself in Mrs. Dalloway's party. Here, the curtain is "beat back" by Ralph Lyon, the Prime Minister is paraded around without the intermediary of the car, and society exists in fancy clothes, in "how delightful to see you," and in nice memories shared with old friends (Woolf 118). These parties that Mrs. Dalloway often throws are safe from the tragedy that characterizes the lives of the Smiths, until the day that the novel is set. On

this day, Sir William Bradshaw brings death with him, brings death "in the middle of [Mrs. Dalloway's] party" (Woolf 129). Suddenly, the bubble is burst, the curtains that Mrs. Dalloway has so painstakingly set up fall, and the rot of war, the vice of society is laid bare in the middle of her stage. "Death at my party," she exclaims, death in society, she realizes (Woolf 129). Mrs. Dalloway has to excuse herself, sensing that the party does not offer her the protection she needs. Death has entered her party like a toxin through a small tear in a hazmat suit, and it begins to poison her. She thinks of Septimus, and she thinks of Othello, "if it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy" (Woolf 130). Mrs. Dalloway understands the truth, she knows why he took his own life. She knows the havoc that men like Sir William Bradshaw wreak upon society. She imagines Septimus going to him, Bradshaw "forcing [his] soul," his "life made intolerable" (130). She feels as if his death is "her disaster — her disgrace" (130). Here, Mrs. Dalloway willingly sets aside the rose-colored reality she fights so hard to hold up around her and acknowledges her part in a society that kills men like Septimus. Society enables men like Sir William Bradshaw, society is men like Sir William Bradshaw, and there he is, death himself at her party. He does not bring death. He is death, and yet she invites him into her party time after time. She can stomach the presence of death as long as it does not make itself known to her, as long as it does not disrupt her safe reality. Now he has made himself known, and she must choose, once again to "go back," to "find Sally and Peter," and to "[come] in from the little room" (Woolf 131). Mrs. Dalloway has seen the face of the beast of human nature just as Septimus does, but she knows that if she returns to her party and continues to beat back the curtain, it will not pursue her. Whereas Septimus is thrown into the beast's den, never given a chance to escape, Mrs. Dalloway will be safe from the monster as long as she continues to look away from it. It

will hunt others, but not her. Here, she finds her sense of proportion, takes just enough time to reflect and to mourn, to acknowledge the death in her party, and then she returns.

This decision to return, to live within the comfort of a reality that consists of career politicians, evening parties, and memories of summer at Bourton, a decision that seems harmless, is a decision that the novel criticizes as a harmful act of enabling the sins of society. Of course, to blame people like the Dalloways and their guests is not to ignore the men like Sir William Bradshaw, like the Prime Minister parading around the party, that have a more active hand in the crushing societal machine of conformity, but it is to acknowledge that passive enabling can be just as harmful as those who actively suppress, when scale is taken into account. The Dalloways are just one couple in a country with millions, people who go about their lives, live in their realites, decide that they are happy with the idealistic world placed before them, with patriotic values and beating back the curtains time and time again. It is a difficult thing to do, to throw the curtains open and let the light shine on the party, to see the other face of reality that they have been hiding from, but the novel condemns those who do not as having a hand in the crime. Just as she is aware of her discontent with her own life and hides that beneath her parties, Mrs. Dalloway and millions of people are, on some level, aware of the post-war issues that linger in society, but they push this reality down beneath their preferred one. In providing an intimate look in the characters' minds, the novel exposes this act.

Even though the novel uses individual people to represent a societal issue, it still reminds the reader that the death of the soul is a personal tragedy. Rezia knows this, feels how society has "failed them," exclaiming that she has never "felt such agony in her

life" (Woolf 71). Hundreds of thousands are suffering, and hundreds of thousands turn a blind eye to the suffering, but Woolf realizes that each one of these people are one man and one woman. One man, fighting to save his soul. One woman, continuing to beat back the curtains lest her life fall apart around her. Both of them, in their own way, fighting off the great beast of human nature, the death at the party, the shadow of Dr. Holmes on the wall, demanding a sense of proportion, blotting out the evening light, murdering young men who idolize Shakespeare, and widowing their wives. Both fighting a battle that will not end until everyone, even those who live outside the battlefield, acknowledge that they are fighting it, acknowledge that there is something more, something darker, beneath the reality they wish to live in.

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. edited by Anne Fernald, Norton Critical Editions, 2021.