

Understanding collectivity through the individual: Peter Walsh's observations on death, the soul, and Mrs. Dalloway

Mrs. Dalloway's supposed antisocial or narcissistic tendency is counteracted through the minor characters that thread through the novel. Although these characters might seem to serve as a collective foil in order to further understand and characterize Clarissa, through deeper examination, these characters have commonalities that shed light on an irrefutable collective consciousness within the novel. Focusing in on the narration of the minor character of Peter Walsh, this social collectivity is revealed to be tied to a deeper collective unconscious that is struggling with isolation, loneliness and inauthenticity. Peter might seem like a character who would be susceptible to the blinding narcissism of Clarissa, however, upon closer look, Peter serves as a kind of clarifying lens through which we see the reality of Clarissa's unhappiness, and further, the unhappiness of all the characters—a collectivity that is characterized by deep, repressed feelings of emptiness and inauthenticity.

The character of Peter Walsh is interesting in the sense that he represents an emotional middle ground between the stoic, unemotional Mr. Dalloway and the deeply troubled Septimus. Peter seems to be a mediator in Woolf's representation of the male psyche, one who is in touch with his emotions and his sadness but manages to remain stable. This balanced personality is what allows him to be able to face the harsh emotional realities that others in his social group cannot. One example of Peter's ability to face these harsh realities of collective unhappiness is through his revelation about "the death of the soul", Woolf's interesting and creative way into representing her perception of an unconsciously unhappy society: "So Peter Walsh snored. He woke with extreme suddenness, saying to himself, 'The death of the soul.' 'Lord, Lord! he said

to himself out loud, stretching and opening his eyes. “The death of the soul.” (49). This repeated phrase “the death of the soul” is certainly evidence of collectivity in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Similar to Yeats’s use of ‘the’ in *Lake Isle of Innisfree*, “the death of the soul” refers not to Walsh himself, but to a greater collective consciousness that is facing soullessness, or in other words, meaninglessness. It refers to the existential crises that characterized much of the art from this era— from artists questioning not only their place in the artistic canon, but also everyday people questioning their purpose and meaning in the world. Despite the many ideological places that different artists seem to land on when it comes to the meaning of existence, one thing pervades the modernist genre— loneliness and disconnection between members of the same social group. Woolf’s take on this is clever, of course. She comments on said disconnect in society through a shared connection, or collectivity, in terms of feeling disconnected.

Walsh waking up to say “the death of the soul” before he even opens his eyes indicates that he says this in a dreamlike, half-awake, half-asleep state. Images of automatic writing or hypnosis are invoked with this scene, as Walsh reveals the deepest fears of his generation in a fleeting moment of “extreme suddenness.” The fact that Walsh’s first conscious reaction is to say to himself “Lord, Lord!” is interesting in its own right. It’s a juxtaposition of the unconscious and the conscious. The unconscious tells him that the human soul is dying, the conscious looks to God for help. This is commentary from Woolf on human nature in the face of existential crises and meaninglessness of life in the modern age. Especially emerging from the highly restrictive, smothering religious norms of the Victorian era, there was a deep divide between those who still hung onto traditional religious beliefs and those who tried to face harsher questions about a human existence without a god. This cultural divide is present all within the single character of Peter Walsh, all within that moment of “extreme suddenness” when an average man waking from

a dream. It's moments like these that minor characters such as Peter are revealed not just to be supporting characters in the tale of Clarissa Dalloway, but rather, to be evidence of Woolf's perception of a collective consciousness.

Later on the same page, Woolf reintroduces this idea of the death of the soul in a different context— this context, of course, is Mrs. Dalloway herself. Clarissa's identity as a party hostess, a hub of social gathering and the ideal wife/woman, makes her a kind of a mirror reflecting life in London at the time. Like many women, Clarissa molds herself not based on authenticity or desire, but on society's standards. Consider this quote from the same page as Walsh's original revelation on the death of the soul: "He could see Clarissa now, turning bright pink; somehow contracting; and saying, 'Oh, I shall never be able to speak to her again!' Whereupon the whole party sitting round the tea-table seemed to wobble. It was very uncomfortable. He hadn't blamed her for minding the fact, since in those days a girl brought up as she was, knew nothing, but it was her manner that annoyed him; timid; hard; arrogant; prudish. 'The death of the soul.' He had said that instinctively, ticketing the moment as he used to do— the death of her soul. Every one wobbled; every one seemed to bow, as she spoke, and then to stand up different" (49). Again Woolf uses repetition to catch our eye and indicate that she wants us to pick up on subtle messages running underneath the ongoing narrative of Clarissa. The repeated use of the word 'wobble' is a clue-in to the collective consciousness revealing itself. Peter is able to serve as a somewhat objective observer to this collective social phenomenon due to his skepticism and disdain for Clarissa. These negative feelings come from a place of unrequited love, but there is also the positive perspective of Peter and Clarissa's history of childhood friendship. The deep familiarity between Peter and Clarissa is the context which sets up this moment and enables him to be a balanced, perceptive narrator. Because of his insights into both the negative and positive

aspects of Clarissa, he is able to portray Woolf's complex ideas about collective consciousness in the sense that he is able to exist outside her powerful social orbit and observe her with both a close eye and a skeptical one. It's Woolf's cleverness in creating this complex social dynamic that allows a minor character like Walsh to have such deep insight.

To return to the text, Peter observes that when Clarissa speaks "the whole party sitting round the tea-table seemed to wobble. It was very uncomfortable" then later repeats "Every one wobbled; every one seemed to bow." As previously mentioned, Clarissa has high social standing, she's seen as the ideal hostess and the ideal wife. The visceral reactions of those around her to her emotional outburst is another occasion where Woolf lets us in on the collective consciousness, again through the guise of Peter. The social and moral standards are being tested when the usually affable and tame hostess breaks out in emotion at the scandal of another woman, when she cries that she "shall never be able to speak to her again!" The 'wobbling' of the table is evidence of collectivity in the sense that Clarissa's outburst is uncomfortable in the sense that it is a challenge to the social norms of a perfect woman, wife, and hostess. However, the norms disallow anyone from outwardly expressing this discomfort, and they repress it—wobbling and bowing under the pressure.

The collective, simultaneous reactions of the party reveal that a social consciousness not only exists in the minds of the characters in Woolf's novel, but also has the power to cross over into the physical realm and potentially dictate behavior. It's interesting to observe the transition here from revealing a collective unconscious being revealed through Peter's dream that melds subtly into observations on the collective consciousness through Peter's narration at the dinner party. Woolf's effect here is that the unconscious becomes the conscious, slowly. Again, it's Woolf's clever characterization of Peter as close enough to Clarissa to see her flaws, but not too

close to be blinded by them— close enough to life to feel its weight, but not close enough to be crushed by it.

In typical *Mrs. Dalloway* fashion, their perceived physical reactions such as wobbling and bowing are centered around Clarissa. However, it's important to note that they're narrated and deciphered by Peter— our consistent middleman. It may seem that Clarissa is the center of Peter's revelation about the death of the soul. He even goes on to morph his original dreamy revelation of "the death of the soul" into what he perceives as "the death of her soul" later on page 49. As incriminating as this may seem in terms of coining the novel as narcissistic, looking at Clarissa through Peter can alternatively be seen as a kind of practice in collectivity itself. Through Clarissa, the one he loves, he understands greater principles of collective unhappiness and emptiness (said death of the soul) that others in the novel are unable to touch without crumbling. Through Clarissa, he is able to begin to understand collectivity.