

Bookmark Essay: Mrs. Dalloway

(High modernism + existentialism + introspective psychology) - plot = Mrs. Dalloway

“What was the meaning of life? That was all--a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years, the great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck in the dark; here was one.” (Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*)

What would every thought you have look like? What if you could accurately capture every fleeting sensation? What if it were narrated by one of the world's most astute observers? Besides the occasional blushing moment, you would likely notice how extraordinarily boring you are. That is because our lives are not typically the stuff of legends and Hollywood blockbusters, but instead painstakingly petty, mundane, and boring. Real life doesn't always resemble a *bildungsroman* or a classic fairy tale--the orphaned childhood, the benevolent fairy godmother, a dragon slain, a princess to save--more likely, it is a middle class existence of first world responsibilities and expectations that chronically stress you until you pass peacefully in your sleep at the ripe old age of seventy-eight.

Virginia Woolf hopes to capture the fleeting sensations of an “ordinary mind on an ordinary day,” ignoring centuries of plot driven novels about the adventures and escapades of heroic figures. Contained within this multitudinous novel are meditations on death, desire, existence, happiness, memories, the past, nationalism, war, class, literature, and much more. On the surface the novel tracks the rambling yet routine existence of two seemingly unrelated people: socialite Clarissa Dalloway preparing for an extravagant party later that evening and shell-shocked veteran Septimus Smith as he adjusts to civilian life.

On a much deeper level however, the novel is purely about the mind: Woolf's mind, the characters' minds, your mind. Pay close attention to the subtle ways she orchestrates your mind from one object or sensation to the next: a woman inside a shop hears a car backfire outside, leading us to the street into the minds of various pedestrians viewing the car, internally gossiping about the possibility of royal cargo within, and then seamlessly into the mind of a shell-shocked man who hears the engine and reimagines incoming mortar rounds exploding overhead. This cinematic technique is not the sweeping storytelling of eminent Victorian novelists, but rather a collectively conscious mind dipping momentarily into glimpses of individual consciousness. It's not a question of whether our own minds work similar to this, but rather whether we will attune our senses to such a phenomenon.

It's one of the only novels I've ever encountered that quite literally changed the way I think, not because of convincing portrayals of social issues or as a novel of ideas in a thinly disguised critique of society, but because it mysteriously uncovers the “stream of consciousness” flowing deep within. It becomes increasingly difficult as you dive deeper into the novel not to allow it to disrupt the constant unconscious flow of your own mind, causing you to look up from your copy with a lingering sensation of Woolf's mind at work within your own: the sunlight upon the page clearer, the tangerine you nibble sweeter, the myriad sensations of life inexplicably now in crisp high definition.