

Traumatic Narrative in Virginia Woolf's Novel *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf was one of the greatest literary artists in the 20th century, pioneering the contemporary English literature with the stream-of-consciousness technique. *Mrs. Dalloway* is her representative work that centers on the internal description of the characters while presenting social conditions of the postwar Britain. This paper examines traumatic narratives of the two protagonists, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, and explores implications of the war as the primordial cause of the spiritual crisis.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, stream of consciousness, traumatic narratives, the postwar Britain

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf is usually represented as one of the first literary artists of stream-of-consciousness, which provides for the readers a profound insight into the characters' internal world with both its disordered treatment of the story line and its shifting viewpoints. The novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of her most representative works. Its plot is seemingly rather displaced, and events presented are immensely composed of instinctual and incident thoughts without consideration of the chronological order. Setting in the postwar era, the story depicts not just the characters' spiritual situation, but also the postwar condition of British society of the 20th century. Of the two protagonists, Clarissa Dalloway is a woman of a rich family, who is going to hold a happily splendid party at night. However, walking down the London Street for preparation, she is intensely preoccupied with stream of thoughts temporally shuffling back and forth. Meanwhile, Septimus Warren Smith, another main character within the story, is a veteran from the war. Having suffered severe physical injuries, he is now disturbed spiritually by the ghosts of the war. The novel is in fact a fictional probing into the characters' innermost feelings, which is significant in portraying the actuality of British society during the postwar period.

Because the thematic concerns are too tightly woven into its form, most studies of the novel focus on its narrative level or writing method. For instance, Bernard Blackstone once states that *Mrs. Dalloway* is "an experiment with time and point of view" (Blackstone, 1949, pp. 74-76); while David Daiches sees the novel as "a brilliant plot of spatial and temporal structuring." (Daiches, 1960, p. 89) Other critics like Ralph Freeman attaches much importance to the novel's subjective relation to its objective world, proposing that the substance of *Mrs. Dalloway* lies in "the opposition of an external world of manners and internal symbolic world." (Freeman, 1963, p. 216) However, this essay presents its thematic aspect in relation to the war, by exploring the spiritual trauma of the characters.

2. Defining Trauma as the Analytical Framework

The term "trauma" derives originally from the Greek word for physical injuries before it refers further to the wound inflicted upon mind. Caruth held that "trauma is an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occur in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomenon." (Caruth, 1996, p. 5) Thus, being belated is the most salient characteristic, given that trauma is actually not fully experienced at the moment, and instead happens over time, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. Janet Pierre also describes it a "delayed response," (Herman, 1992, p. 45) while Freud states it to be "deferred action" or "afterwardness." (Freud, 1895, p. 12) Since in Freudian psychoanalysis, just as he points out, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event," (Freud, 1895, p. 5) the least similar images or events in relation to traumatic memory tend to trigger mental destruction. In fact, traumatic memory is central to psychoanalysis, which unlike normal mentality, is

inexorably denied a primary narrative capability. During traumatic experience, flashback has become a routine occasion, disrupting mental representation of its temporal order. As J. Pierre once claims that memories related to trauma remain unclear and unconscious as well, and tend to encroach into people's consciousness occasionally, the failures of repressing traumatic memory are usually confirmed by the returning of traumatic events in the form of repetitive, and compulsive behaviors. For that, neurotic symptom happens, as a result of the repressed drives followed by desires of traumatic events. Excessive in frequency, such rebounding to histories finally incur sufferers' biological urge of equilibrium, which is then theorized as "death drive." (Freud, 1895, p. 7) Herman once said that "traumatic events destroy the victim's fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of self, and the meaningful order of creation." (Herman, 1992, p. 51) People who suffer from trauma are susceptible to suspicious atmosphere, in which any trustworthy relationship with people around is hard to construct. Therefore, remedies for trauma rely upon rebuilding one's identity and a positive sense of the world.

Trauma in narrative appears due to the cross-disciplinary development of trauma theory. Because the first half of the twentieth century is marked indeed by historical catastrophe, in which the two Great World Wars had led to a global turmoil, contemporary fiction is nonetheless shaped by the representation of those events. And it is not surprising that theorists have turned to the concept of trauma as an instrument for cultural studies. In this case, trauma is not only a word for disaster, but also as a method of interpretation to unfold the far-pervasive effects of the events. As James Berger in his *Contemporary Literature* has maintained that "a traumatic analysis is both constructivist and empirical." (Berger, 1997, p. 572) in weighing largely upon traumatic events, trauma theory is also of great value in historical studies within literary works.

3. Examining Traumatic Symptom

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, written in the form of stream-of-consciousness, is vivid and authentic in representing the traumatic experiences of the characters caused by the First World War. There are two main characters who are described to experience the traumatic suffering incurred by the First World War. Both Clarissa's spiritual discomfort and Smith's psychic problems as well are relevant to the Great War I since Smith witnessed his friend Evan's death in the First World War and Clarissa exclaimed with relief that "it was the middle of June. The war was over." (Woolf, 1996, p. 2) It has to be found that the novel is for the most part involved in the tone of depression and melancholy, which is in accordance with the thematic issue of the War subsumed subtly in the narrative of the characters' spirituality. Clarissa's life is inevitably subject to the authority of her husband, Richard Dalloway, who with his parliamentary stance, enables the whole family to enjoy both a superior reputation as well as a reliable economy. However, part of Clarissa's self rejects this deference all the time, which is invariably conflated with her strong rebellious spirit beneath. And it signifies an uneven contest between free individuality and the male-dominated society she dwells in and does unmask a truth that Woolf's feminist thoughts inspired by the Feminist liberation of the 20th century are inlaid into Clarissa's thoughts in which her awareness of female independence is intensely strong.

In fact, what Clarissa represents is free individuality, repressed by male's compulsive control. Dismayed at her impotence of securing her female's role as a social solidarity immuring to male's control, she is pathetically oppressive. On the contrary, Richard embodies a masculine power continuously hampering female autonomy. Standing in an opposed position, both of them are thus holding things back from each other. Clarissa entertains a suspicious hatred towards Richard, while defying the supreme male's society he stands for, which she perceives to be a male's ruthless claim over political interests and individual liberty. Therefore, Clarissa compares herself to "a nun withdrawing," in the narrow bedroom where she is compelled by Richard to "sleep undisturbed" (Woolf, 1996, p. 23) From Clarissa's point of view, Richard's implausible demand has amounted to a kind of hypocrisy concealing his male-chauvinism, which in the meantime coincides with the military power and its forceful impact in the War that took place not long ago and that has rendered Clarissa a sense of her being "shrivelled" and "aged". (Woolf, 1996, p. 23) Clarissa's detesting resistance to the enclosed attic is bound up with her sensitive feelings towards the purely white "sheet". Because it shares the same color with that in hospital beds, Clarissa's lying in the bed of white sheet is figuratively interrelated with her being in the hospital of the army where the wounded soldiers in the War was being steadily sent in the beds with their characteristic white sheets.

Thus, when Clarissa is shut up with the white sheet in that limited space of the attic room, she is then enforced into her thoughts and memories of the deaths and the wounded in the Great War, which is no less cruel than being subdued by military brutality. For that reason, alignment arises between male's dictation and the cruelty of the war. As for Richard Dalloway, he has a distant relationship with Clarissa, which parallels with the lack of mutual understanding and sympathy between them, and also his intimate engagement with Lady Bruton who

“has the reputation of being more interested in politics than people”. (Woolf, 1996, p. 78) Their shared concerns about politics and the holy upholding of campaigns are characteristic of the masculine party that solely unites people like Lady Bruton and Richard Dalloway, in which Clarissa takes no place at all. Although with a female identity, Lady Bruton has been categorized within the male’s community, precisely because of her ambitions in political issues, which has made her behave like a “general” and talk “like a man” (Woolf, 1996, p. 78). Clarissa is not repugnant to Lady Bruton simply because of Richard’s excessively respectful regard for her but also for Lady Bruton’s that intolerably obsessive kind of fondness in politics, which has made all the difference between her and Clarissa who is claimed to be politically empty-headed.

The power consolidated upon Lady Bruton and Richard bears a resemblance indeed to the malicious influence the War has imposed upon Clarissa’s spiritual life, for which she senses grief and misery, lamenting that there distracts from her an hopeful access to a life of not having to be susceptible to a male’s authority, and count constantly on the matters and orders militarily conjured up. Another story line that sets up the same thematic basis of the male’s inhibition of female freedom or free individuality can be perceptible in the complex sentiments that Clarissa has for Peter Walsh, which is inconsistently oscillated between love and hatred. Clarissa is in love deeply with Peter even up to now, and his unexpected visit brings about the nostalgic memories of their past together, which is indeed a release from the dull business of her life. However, that love is far from competent to be reconciled with his indifference to her. And as with Richard Dalloway, Peter’s flirting with girls even at his age incurs inside her a grudging jealousy and she hates him for it.

And despite their cherished past together, Clarissa rarely accepts the way his life looks like just as he assumes himself to be “adventurer, reckless, daring...careless of these damned proprieties.” (Woolf, 1996, p. 39) Peter is an unconventional person, neglecting the social regulations. He tends to search for a most convenient way for a maximum happy gratification. For all, he is rarely prevented an opportunity of a social promotion, and does enjoy a certain amount of free individuality, which is a ironic contradiction to Clarissa who does not feel relieved a bit by the luxuriant life of which she is now in possession. Moreover, her quarrel with Peter Walsh often winds up in the man’s narcissist success. Thus, Peter’s standing for male’s supremacy is continuously colliding with Clarissa’s longing for self-independence. In addition, Peter Walsh has this habitual action of taking out the “pocket knife,” (Woolf, 1996, p. 30), a tool applied to cut and sharpen things, of which Clarissa is particularly afraid as “knife” metaphorically conforms to one’s wickedness and viciousness in war times.

4. Representing War in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Endowed with new possibilities of the post-war age, Elizabeth tends to be open-minded, being able to accept everything that comes her way. The divergence of attitudes and characters as well creates the relationship of alienation between Clarissa and Elizabeth. Because it is said that the pressure inflicted on mind by the war can be a result of the incapability of coming into good terms with a new postwar environment, Clarissa’s this debunking criterion upon the disintegration of traditional values can be defined as a innate challenge to the war whose power in changing the social situation is immeasurable. It then leads to Clarissa’s yearning for the past before the War. With her restrictive faculty and obstinate intention combined together, she is now immersed into a state of confusion and despondency.

Unlike Clarissa Dalloway, Smith’s relation to the war is most explicit as he participated himself in the First World War and for that he was painfully wounded. Although surviving the war, he is not ensured a felicity of the postwar life. Instead, his nearly healed physical injuries gives way to the spiritual disruption, filled merely with the memories of the wartime experience. Unable to put up with this kind of dismantling neurosis, he stops his struggling mind by committing suicide; “‘I’ll give it you’ and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer’s area railings.” (Woolf, 1996, p. 108) For Smith, the destructive influence of the war is tremendous. To make it more evident, Woolf focalizes through his mind while rendering a delineation of his acts and words, which is in close connection with his mentality. Because the nature of the words and actions are indecipherable, Smith’s insanity is thus amplified, through which the immense magnitude pointed toward the negativity of the war is made evident.

However, in spite of the difficulties inherent in the translation of Smith’s language, a clue of the meaning can still be detected by his repetitious references to the Great War I. He resents the War, contending it to be malevolent deceiver lying to him all about expectations or dreams. After serving with great distinction in the War, he returns to his native land, expecting more before he witnesses only a worse condition of his country, along with it, a frequent exposure to the recollections of the suffering and deaths in the Wartime period. For that, he finds it painfully impossible to constrain his mental rebounding into his past experience in the War, speaking “the word ‘war’ repeatedly” during his clinical treatment given by Dr. Holmes (Woolf, 1996, p. 71). When

commenting on Smith's death, Rezia, his wife states that "Men killed in battle were thus saluted, and Smith had been through the war." (Woolf, 1996, p. 109) Life in the postwar age is hard for Smith. He then demonstrates his victory over the struggling memories of the war by ending his life. As is analyzed before, military forces are interwoven with the authority of male-dominated society, by which Clarissa is deprived of her free individuality. The same happens for Smith who senses a strenuous repression by Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, as he declares them as brutes; "'You brute! You brute!' cried Smith, seeing human nature, that is Dr Holmes, enter the room." (Woolf, 1996, p. 69) Declining to receive any therapy conducted by Sir William Bradshaw, he argues with his wife about "what power had Bradshaw over him?" (Woolf, 1996, p. 107)

For a restraint of his sanity, Dr. Holmes forces him into sleep with tranquilizer, which is metaphorically referent to war's being empowered in killing people. Therefore, Smith is scared of Dr. Holmes who infallibly warns him of the vicious enemies in the battlefield. Smith is among the first persons who volunteer to the war, and his prestigious reputation in the army is proudly erected by his courageous and valiant performance in the battlefield. Like the others who join the war hopefully, Smith has on his vision board the self-promotion and the protection of his country as well. But his high pursuit is far delicate to accommodate the brutality of the war in which his witness to the loss of lives constitutes a large portion of his spiritual disturbance. Thus, he talks a lot of "the appalling crime" (Woolf, 1996, p. 71), which can be related to his killing of people in the battlefield. For Woolf, she proposes that the underlying nature of things can be easily discarded by an explicit transposition of the reality, for which, only a continuous probing into the thoughts and views can produce a constant efficiency of unfolding a story. Therefore, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, an overt manifestation is replaced by Woolf with the way of rhetorical references, with which to uncover the permeating influence of the War.

5. Narrating Trauma in *Mrs. Dalloway*

People suffering from trauma feel the loss of one's self. Clarissa's sense of emptiness about her being is repetitiously exhibited in the novel. Waking up in the morning, she exclaims that "What a lark! What a plunge!" (Woolf, 1996, p. 3) Such words of lark and plunge give the best expression of Clarissa's chaotic state of mind. The image of Lark indicates her crave for freedom whereas the word of plunge referring to a dramatic action of falling down high from above points out the taxing pressure she is going through now. As a victim of male supremacy, along with the radically converted condition in the postwar world, she is constantly caught between her sense of life and death; "She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very dangerous to live even one day." (Woolf, 1996, p. 6) Having failed to come up with a compromise between the two, "she has the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown." (Woolf, 1996, p. 8) Clarissa's loss of self-identity can be ascribed to the crumbling of her beliefs, and it has given rise to her abandonment of trust in the present age, which she contends full of uncertainties. Devoid of security and hope, she is haunted by her hesitant doubt towards everyone. She looks down upon Miss Kilman as a "brutal monster" (Woolf, 1996, p. 9), regards Lady Bruton as "a dial" (Woolf, 1996, p. 23), and conceives Peter Walsh an "adventurer" (Woolf, 1996, p. 39). Her relationship with people is terribly dealt with. Troubled by the present life, her mind traces back to the good old days in Bourton. Even the memories are obscure under the intense pressure. Ripped of courage of expecting a hopeful life, she tries to appease her frightening heart with these Shakespeare's sonnets, muttering to herself, "Fear no more the heat o' sun, nor the furious winter's rages." (Woolf, 1996, p. 7)

Incapable of coping with his trauma, Smith ends his life by jumping off the window. The traumatic suffering for Smith is extraordinarily torturous. As a veteran, Smith does not depart from his memories of the war. Instead, the impression of his experiences in the war upon his mind is clear and lively, mostly in the form of his nightmare dreams, and the image of his friend Evans. The past haunts him so hysterically, that his whole being is touched with horrid and consternation. Thus, "Smith Warren Smith, aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazed eyes which had that look of apprehension in them which makes strangers apprehensive too." (Woolf, 1996, p. 21) In traumatic theory, suffers of trauma are spared of psychic disorder, caused by traumatic memory at the beginning stage. His reaction to traumatic events undergoes a gradual process. During the four years after the war, he is settled and peaceful, until his experiences in the war enter his dreams increasingly, and strange visions then take place. However, "Smith let himself think about horrible things, as she could too, if she tried. He had grown stranger and stranger. He said people were talking behind the bedroom walls ...He saw things too-he had seen an old woman's head in the middle of a fern...All the little red and yellow flowers are out on the grass." (Woolf, 1996, p. 50) In this way, Smith is extremely obsessed with flowers that have the color of redness, such as the roses. At the hearing of his wife saying that the roses are half dead, he even paradoxically cries that "there was a man outside; Evans presumably; and the roses, which Rezia said were half dead, had been picked by him in the field of Greece." (Woolf, 1996, p. 69)

As it is mentioned, anything correlated with the traumatic events will bring about the spiritual collapse of the traumatic sufferers. The roses share the same color with blood, which is an account for his frenzy mentality. Smith is exposed to paranoia schizophrenia, lingering on the blurred line of delusion and reality, confusing trees with human bodies: "The trees waved, brandished" (Woolf, 1996, p. 52). Cutting trees down implies for him the loss of human lives, making him irritated and furious. Even far away from the war, his traumatic memories are full of Evans' death, making him distressful. A large number of his delusions and ideas of references do not part from Evans' being killed in the war. Evans has turned to be an apparition perplexedly hovering Smith's mind: "He sang. Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the war was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself" (Woolf, 1996, p. 52).

6. Conclusion

The First World War is a catastrophic event, mercilessly striking people into countless wounds and deaths. Despite the ceasing of the War, grief and agony were not promptly dispelled. Despite the ceasing of the War, grief and agony were not promptly dispelled. They kept lingering on the minds for years, until they settle for a perpetual stay in the form of traumatic memories. In the light of trauma theory, the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* not only guides us to a better understanding of pervasive impacts of traumatic experiences, but also serves a reflection of the traumatic narratives of different protagonists. The traumatic suffering depicted in the novel is pathetically diffusing. In the middle of 1921, having just finished *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf spent some two months bedridden with psychosomatic symptoms, "wearisome headache, jumping pulse, aching back, frets, fidgets, lying awake." (Woolf, 1977, p. 125) However, an exploration of trauma is not for the only sake of trauma, but to draw our attention to the external threat of the War, which is inhuman and dreadful. Nowadays, in the world of the 21st century, the potentiality for the eruption of wars has been largely reduced. Yet, owing to the historical lessons taught by the two Great Wars, all the countries in the world should consistently insist on the principle of a peaceful compatibility, so that life of bliss and felicity is ensured for human, and the integration of human's minds can thus be forged into a permanent protection.

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