

Post-Impressionist Paintings and Parallel Structure in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract: Post-impressionists put emphasis on design which is also the focus of Virginia Woolf in her literary creation. Influenced by post-impressionist paintings, Woolf reveals the meaning of life through constructing parallel structure to present the fact that people are lack of communication and that the truth in life is often achieved at important moment. The seemingly unconnected human life experiences are different facets of life, and together they construct the wholeness out of the fragments.

Keywords: *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf, Unity, Post-Impressionism

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's concern for the form of the novel is her life-long interest in the literature creation. She wrote to Clive Bell in 1908, "I think a great deal of my future, and settle what book I am to write—how I shall reform the novel and capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes" [1]. Virginia Woolf begins to initiate a new form of the novel. She attempts to combine other artistic forms with the novel writing.

Fragmentary is one of the features of the novel of stream-of-consciousness. However, Virginia Woolf achieves the formal unity out of fragments by a parallel structure in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Influenced by post-impressionism, she uses parallel structures in this novel to present the life of Clarissa who is the wife of Mr. Dalloway, a committee member with a high social position and the life of Septimus, a shell-shocked veteran. As she said, "I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and insane side by side" [2]. Through the parallel characters, Virginia Woolf presents different facets of life. She manages to put the sane and the insane, past and present at the same time, and also achieves the artistic effect of balance and beauty.

In modern times the classic categories of absolute space and absolute time have been falsified and discarded, the division of arts into purely temporal and purely spatial become utterly hypothetical. William Fleming points out that, "time and movement are inextricably interwoven, since all time is measured by movement and change of relative positions, and

all mobility has, of necessity, duration. Hence the degree of the mobility can serve as a criterion for another type of classification" [3]. So the conventional recognized boundaries between the arts of time and space mean much less now than they used to. All forms of art are directly related to the aesthetic beauty they have created.

The balanced structure in *Mrs. Dalloway* marks the maturity in Virginia Woolf's writing. After all the experimental short novels, like *Jacob's Room* and *The Voyage Out*, she finally arrives at a proper form to enclose the human heart, which gives the impression of simultaneous connections between parallel characters. It is a form patterned like waves in a pond rather than a railway line. Although there is no physical proximity between the characters, Woolf gives us the artfully formed narrative connection in the novel. The parallel structure is a form adopted by Virginia Woolf from the post-impressionist, painting which is concerned about light and color. Like post-impressionist painters, such as Van Gogh, Paul Cezanne and Paul Gauguin, Virginia Woolf in this novel focuses on the process of selection from all her impressions. To understand how Virginia Woolf combines her narrative art with the impressionist painting technique, I will talk about impressionist painting first in the following.

Impressionism began as a movement first in painting, chiefly developed in France during the late 19th and early 20th century. Instead of painting an ideal beauty like classical artists, impressionists try to depict what they see at a given moment, capturing a fresh, original vision that is hard for some people to accept as beauty. So they observe nature more directly and set down fleeting aspects, especially the changing

light of the sun. Simplification is a feature of impressionist painting. Impressionists simplify their compositions, omitting detail to achieve a striking overall effect.

The Post-impressionism refers to the artistic movements under the influence of impressionism. The post-impressionists develop their arts in another direction. Post-impressionists recognize that subjectivism finds its expression in surface and points out that it is the function of art not to imitate but to find equivalents; and “one chief aspect of order in a work of art is unity...in a picture this unity is due to a balancing of the attractions of the eye about the central life of the picture” [4]. Roger Fry justifies the imaginative life by saying that “the artist might if he chose to take a mystical attitude and declare that the fullness and completeness of the imaginative life he leads may correspond to an existence more real and more important than any that we know of in moral life” [4]. Woolf extends Roger Fry’s graphic art theory to the field of novel writing. She maintains that what the novelist has to do is to record the spiritual rather than material life. What a novelist records is the kaleidoscopic impressions received by the mind on an ordinary day and the task of the novelist is “to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible” [5]. To do this, the novelist has to “stand further back from life” to give “the outline rather than the detail” [5].

Virginia Woolf borrows the perspective of Impressionists and Post-impressionists to seek for an aesthetic effect through the momentary description and present the parallel characters. Virginia Woolf once claimed, “examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions-trivial fantastic evanescence or engraved with sharpness of steel” [6]. She followed her lines believing that novelists should try to capture the evanescent moment of being and not conform to the conventional fictional plot or characterization. In this novel she selects the significant impression to converge the parallel lines. In this way she highlights the outline of life and the nature of life.

2. Parallel Characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf achieves a new narrative form by adopting the post-impressionist painting technique in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Like in post-impressionist painting, Virginia Woolf constructs the organic wholeness of her novel through omitting details and giving parallel arrangement. Around the central character Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf presents five pairs of parallel characters in order to present the contrast and interaction at the same time and achieve the unity.

Septimus, a shell-shocked man whom Mrs. Dalloway never meets throughout the novel forms a parallel with her to depict the mental state of the sane and the insane. Mrs. Dalloway’s former lover Peter is a parallel to reveal the romantic aspect of her character. Mrs. Dalloway’s husband Mr. Dalloway is a serious Conservative member who is a parallel to present the Clarissa’s rational thinking. Another parallel character is Miss. Kilman, the tutor of Clarissa’s daughter who represents the

religious power which is against Mrs. Dalloway’s free spirit. Unlike Mrs. Dalloway who is sociable and vain, the plain-looking and practical Elizabeth forms another parallel with her. All the parallel lines converge at the center of the novel presented by Mrs. Dalloway’s party, and form a harmonious wholeness. In the following I will analyze this parallel structure in details.

2.1. *Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus*

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa is the center of the novel. Around Clarissa there are several paralleled lines between the characters. With these parallel characters Virginia Woolf builds up the work’s unity. This way of constructing *Mrs. Dalloway* also expresses well Virginia Woolf’s idea that individual people live in a universal wholeness. For Virginia Woolf, the unity not only exists between human beings, but between human beings and non-human world. In her novels, people are at once alone and together. They are fragments; and part of a great harmony. Cut off from one another in any kind of social way, they are yet intangibly linked not only to others but also to the universe around them. She recorded in her diary on 19 June 1923: “In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticize the social system and to show it at work, at most intense.” [7]The problem she now faced was that of integrating these disparate themes into one coherent novel via the characters of Clarissa and Septimus Warren Smith.

The parallel between Clarissa and Septimus belongs to such kind of isolated soul. These two parallel characters form a sharp contrast in their mental states, characters and life attitudes. Septimus represents the insane world. He is mad after experiencing the inhuman war. He has watched the death of his friend Evans in the battlefield with indifference. He survives while others die. After that, he indulges in self-blaming. The cruelty of the war makes Septimus lose his ability to judge life. Nothing is reliable to him. Although Septimus is longing for life, he ends his life by throwing himself from a window.

When Septimus is suffering from the intrusion of Holmes and Bradshaw into his life, and finally kills himself, Mrs. Ramsay is giving a party in her house. Septimus’s isolation and desperation make a sharp contrast with Mrs. Ramsay’s successful self-assertion. When Septimus is worried about life, Mrs. Ramsay is concerned a great deal about her party. Different from Septimus, Mrs. Dalloway is mentally healthy and sociable. She is positive to life. Life for Mrs. Ramsay is an impulsion. Every practical thing passing through her eyes like glove, book stores, fishmonger’s, and florists can draw her attention. She is keen to observe other people, and cares about the injustice of the society and about the politics. She can hold her mental balance to perform properly her social roles. As the wife of a committee member, she possesses the public-spirit. She is always ready to hold a party which the Prime Minister will attend. All these prove a healthy and sociable Clarissa.

Despite her mental health and social instinct, Mrs. Dalloway is longing for death. The high social rank and admirable parties fulfill Mrs. Ramsay’s vanity but not her

desire. On the one hand, she wants to shape other people's opinion about her; on the other hand, she sees the absurdity in it. Most of the time, Clarissa faces the split reality, and suffers from not being able to be her true self. Throughout the novel the lines from *Cymbeline* "fear no more the heat o' the sun" passes through both Septimus's and Mrs. Ramsay's mind from time to time. It is a temptation for Mrs. Ramsay. When Clarissa hears of the death of Septimus in her party, she wonders: "But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? 'If it were now to die,' twere now to be most happy" [8]. At this moment, Mrs. Ramsay admires Septimus, because Septimus's yearning for death triumphs over his commitment to life. In this sense, Mrs. Ramsay feels disappointed about herself to continue her life without knowing the true meaning in it.

In these two parallel characters, Septimus stands for the insane world, while Mrs. Dalloway represents the rational world. With their mental state, individual characters and attitudes towards life and death, Virginia Woolf forms the a contrast and an interaction between these two characters who never meet each other throughout the novel. This unique design expresses Virginia Woolf's idea that people live in a universal wholeness.

2.2. *Mrs. Dalloway and Peter*

In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa's life is paralleled with another character Peter. Peter was Clarissa's first boyfriend. They were fond of each other when they were very young. They share many common interests in their characters. Yet there are also big differences between them. Peter is a foil to Mrs. Dalloway reflecting her other aspects in character. As Woolf described the writing of Mrs. Dalloway is a "tunneling process" [9] to "dig out beautiful caves behind my characters" [9], which becomes the root for her narrative strategy.

Both Peter and Clarissa are poetic. Clarissa is sensitive to the outer world just like a poet. From time to time, Shakespeare's poetic lines will pass through Clarissa's mind. We can say that she combines her feelings with the poetic world. Similar to Clarissa, Peter possesses the quality of a poet, sensitive and sharp-minded. "It was the state of the world that interested him; Wagner, Pope's poetry, people's characters eternally, and defects of her own soul." [8] All these show they share similar interests.

Romanticism is also a shared character between Clarissa and Peter. They have been passionately falling in love with each other when they are young. They love for love's sake. They spend many happy years in the countryside talking to each other openly. Clarissa enjoys the life immensely and cherishes Peter's gaiety. Romance is an uncontrollable power for both of them.

However, their love is doomed to end with disappointment because of their differences. Peter is adventurous; he cares nothing but his own true feeling. He does things out of his instinct, and does not care about the conventions. His unscrupulousness is much different with worldly Clarissa. Clarissa is a woman of vanity; she is in pursuit of wealthy and

stable life. Clarissa's sociable disposition and matter-of-fact way of life make a sharp contrast with Peter's adventurousness.

The parallel character Peter reveals Clarissa's other aspects of her personality. Through their shared interests and different values in life, Virginia Woolf combines these two characters and enriches the characterization of Mrs. Ramsay from different aspects. Peter is the romantic aspect of Clarissa.

2.3. *Mrs. Dalloway and Mr. Dalloway*

As husband of Clarissa, Mr. Dalloway is also a parallel character to her. Influenced by Sigmund Freud, Virginia Woolf exploited the aesthetic possibilities of surface pattern of apparent intentions concealing a contradictory pattern of repressed intention, [10] as shown in the following aspects.

As a conservative member, Mr. Dalloway is well aware of his social roles as professional Clarissa. Both of them have the tendency to oppress their desire and fulfill the social demands. In this sense, Clarissa and Mr. Dalloway also come into accord that they are willing to keep a distance between people. They reach the understanding to keep their independence in their marriage.

However, Romantic Clarissa forms a contrast with dull Mr. Dalloway. Clarissa has a way of getting on in the world. She is sensitive and poetic and keen to see through people. She holds parties for Mr. Dalloway and makes her drawing room a sort of meeting-place. She is at always the center of the parties in order to show other people her cordiality and pleasure. On the contrary, Richard belongs to that kind of person who is unable to express his feelings. He loves his wife, yet there is a gulf between them, he does not know how he can get over it. So Clarissa never gets what she wants in the marriage. She chooses Richard for his good behavior and admirable social position; she has no fun with him. Although grateful for what he does, Clarissa is unmoved by her relationship with Richard. In this pair of parallel characters, Mr. Dalloway helps to present Clarissa's rationality and vanity. Virginia Woolf makes use of the sharing and contrasts between husband and wife to fulfill her characterization. Mr. Dalloway is the rational aspect of Clarissa.

2.4. *Mrs. Dalloway and Miss. Kilman*

Miss. Kilman, the tutor of Mrs. Dalloway's daughter, is another parallel character to Clarissa. These two characters form the contrast between their different believes in life. Clarissa is a skeptic and holds no belief in religion, while Miss. Kilman is a Christian with all the obligations.

Clarissa and Miss. Kilman belong to different social status. Born a poor woman, Miss. Kilman is all the time self-conscious about her inferiority. Once she is very near to the happiness when she has a chance in Miss. Dolby's school, yet the war comes and ruins everything. She believes that she has been cheated by life and turns against the hypocrisy of upper class people. Although she is grateful to the Dalloways for the employment as a tutor to their daughter, she needs inwardly to humiliate the gracious and lovely Clarissa.

The perceivable Clarissa is really shocked by this religious passion. Love and religion are both detestable to her. People like Miss. Kilman are unbearable to Clarissa. After Clarissa has seen the death of her sister before her very eyes, she holds that “there were no gods; no one was to blame” and she evolved “this atheist’s religion of doing good for the sake of goodness” [4]. Holding this in mind Clarissa really sees through the cruelest things in the world, the things that are clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous.

This pair of parallel characters shows Mrs. Dalloway’s belief in life. By comparing to Miss. Kilman who is an ardent religious believer, Virginia Woolf reveals that Mrs. Dalloway is a skeptic. The image of Clarissa becomes more and more solid to readers.

2.5. *Mrs. Dalloway and Elizabeth*

Clarissa’s daughter, Elizabeth forms another parallel character with her. Elizabeth has a different character with Clarissa. She even does not share a similar appearance with Clarissa.

Elizabeth’s innocence and kindness attract Miss. Kilman so much. For Miss. Kilman, Elizabeth embodies an ideal of youth and beauty, so she becomes attached to Elizabeth. Actually, Miss. Kilman’s efforts to overcome Clarissa are channeled into an attempt to possess the soul of her daughter. Elizabeth becomes the battleground on which the two women fight. Clarissa tries to keep her affection and Miss. Kilman to lure her into the ways of communion, prayer books, and God by preventing her from going to her mother’s party. In fact, Elizabeth takes no interest in either of their business. She cannot know why Miss. Kilman always makes one feel so small; neither can she understand why her mother gives so many parties. She is just delighted to be free, and being left to do what she likes in the country. So in Clarissa’s eyes, Elizabeth is such a dumb girl, she is always worried about losing her daughter.

All of Clarissa’s relationships converge at the party which she gives at the end of the day and at the end of the novel. It is here that she meets the Bradshaws and hears of Septimus’s death. All her guests come to the party, including her daughter. Her worries about her party dissolve. She feels a deep understanding towards that young man who has killed himself. She can understand that it is people like Dr. Bradshaw who makes life unbearable for Septimus. She realizes that “[L]ife is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?” [8] Mrs. Ramsay understands what Septimus suffers from, because she also suffers from the intrusion into her peaceful mental life from people such as Miss. Kilman.

Clarissa’s deep understanding of the meaning of Septimus’s suicide shows that to some extent the two selves are one. Both Septimus and Clarissa are bothered by the split reality. They try to find the eternal and stable things in the fragmented life. They want to know the other aspect of their life, yet they cherish the “privacy of the soul” [8] so much that they cannot accept the intrusion into their heart. The lines from *Cymbeline*—“Fear no more the heat o’ the sun/Nor the furious

winter’s rage” [8]—which pass through the consciousness of both Septimus and Clarissa at various points in the novel. They both use it to conciliate their souls. The lines not only foreshadow the suicide which Septimus must finally resort to in order to escape his torment, but also suggest the attraction such a temptation holds for Clarissa herself. Clarissa’s proper social self never entirely prevents her from the temptation to self-deconstruction which she finds as compelling as Septimus does. They both understand the security and relief offered by extinction. For both of them death is a refuge from the terror of loneliness as well as a protest against the oppression of people like Homes and Bradshaw who make living intolerable. From this we can say Septimus can be seen as a death-obsessed version of Clarissa.

By having these paralleled lines, *Mrs. Dalloway* succeeds in ordering the randomness of life into a coherent form which captures the nature of being alive. Although individuals are fragmented in themselves, they are at the same time belonging to a larger pattern in which their isolated selves are part of a transcendental unity.

3. Conclusion

By adopting a parallel structure, Virginia Woolf achieves her artistic design of presenting the web of interaction of the characters. Her characters do not just go through their own life side by side. A subject dwelt on by one person builds up the bridge into the next person’s thoughts. Woolf moves us from consciousness to consciousness by creating particular moments of immediate physical contact between people on the streets of London, or by having characters intersect in the thinking of one another, shifting us deftly from one mind to the next. In this way, Woolf sets up the formal unity of a novel depicting a world in which people are cut off from themselves as well as from one another.

This is the way post-impressionists do in their paintings. The post-impressionist Paul Cezanne considers that, painting does not mean to copy the reality blindly; it means the pursuit of the harmony resort to certain relationships. Their paintings do not focus on the present reality, but on the momentary consciousness and memories to draw every parallel line into geometrical lines, in this way they can set up an artistic and organic unity. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there are several parallel lines—the characters, each of them can form a separate picture, yet there is a center, which is Clarissa. The background is the Victoria Street, and each character is a passerby, they move with the Big Ben striking hours. However, they interact with each other at a certain point with the characters’ responding to one scene or one subject. As at Clarissa’s party, all the separate lines converge together; this gains the wholeness of the novel and also reveals the deeper meaning in life.

The parallel characterization shows Virginia Woolf’s unique design in this novel. She breaks away the traditional plot in the novel and structures parallel characters by making them each live in his or her own life circle only and letting their thinking flow in and out of each character freely. By presenting parallel characters and revealing their thinking towards one theme,

Virginia Woolf sets up the formal unity of a novel. Both fashionable Clarissa enjoying a high social position and poor Septimus suffering from the shell-shocked torment share the similar idea towards life and death. Although these two parallel characters never meet and do not know each other in the novel, their shared attitude towards life and death shows that these separate two selves are one. Around Clarissa there is another parallel character—Miss. Kilman. The same oppression opposed by her on Clarissa intensifies Clarissa's understanding and sympathy towards Septimus. Parallel characters around Clarissa's marriage also help to reveal Clarissa's personality and her thinking towards life.

Through parallel structure, we can find the wholeness in the book: sanity and insanity, with which Clarissa and Septimus complete each other. Virginia Woolf presents the characters in the complex emotional life. At the end of the novel all the paralleled lines converge at the party Clarissa gives. The last line of *Mrs. Dalloway*—"For there she was" [8] echoes Peter's earlier description of Clarissa—"Not that she was striking; not beautiful at all; there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything clever; there she was. However, there she was" [8]. By having these paralleled lines, Virginia Woolf succeeds in ordering the randomness of life into a coherent form which captures the nature of being alive and holds firmly a whole world and soul.

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