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Clarissa's Passion

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She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen, unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway.

Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway

How can we see what is invisible, what is unseen, what is unknown? Virginia Woolf, in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, introduces Clarissa Dalloway, a character whose elusive sexuality has been analyzed by a large number of critics with no consensus on it. The masking of Clarissa's sexuality is the key to understanding why so many critics don't accept lesbianism as a definitive answer to the debate, and in order to make visible, to see and to know what lies under the mask, I suggest that we work like a sonar. By sending signals towards the invisible object, and observing if the object repels or absorbs those signals, we can trace the image of the invisible, or at least, define the limits of its essence. In this case, our "signals" will take the form of the following questions: what shapes Clarissa's life, and what transforms her from Clarissa to the social entity that is Mrs. Dalloway? The institution of marriage is what helps mask Clarissa's sexual orientation and passion for women. In his article, "The Sane Woman in the Attic: Sexuality and Self Authorship in Mrs. Dalloway," Jesse Wolfe's theories about social pragmatism and anti-foundationalism are basic to understanding the behavior of many people who, like Clarissa, did not fit in the sexual constraints inherited from the Victorian era; however, I will try to add some shades to his interpretation of Clarissa's marriage.

Richard Dalloway, Peter Walsh and Sally Seton are the three characters in the novel who might help to understand Clarissa's choices in terms of sexual pragmatism. Peter Walsh appears already in the first page of the novel, linked to Clarissa's youth memories and to his "awfully dull" (Woolf, 1925, 1) letters from India. The importance of Walsh in Clarissa's life is

circumscribed by the category “what could have been but it wasn’t,” and in this sense, Walsh represents the alternative to Richard Dalloway. Marriage seems an unavoidable choice for Mrs. Dalloway since there is not enough support in the book that suggests the option of a single life, but Peter Walsh “was so passionately in love with Clarissa,” that the marriage would have left little space for her, and “she had often said to him (Richard) that she had been right not to marry Peter Walsh; which knowing Clarissa, was obviously true; she wanted support.” (ibid.:117). The reasons for rejecting Peter Walsh lie in Clarissa’s pragmatic sense of life, but also in her lack of passionate love for Peter. Their relationship seems to be one of two siblings who know everything about each other and enjoy one another’s company. When Clarissa meets Peter the day of her party, she thinks “If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day!” (ibid.:46). But it is hard to believe such a statement when there are elements in the novel that prove that Peter’s personality would never fit within Clarissa’s practical sense of life: “All his life long Peter had been fooled like that; first getting sent down from Oxford; next marrying the girl on the boat going out to India; now with the wife of a Major in the Indian Army – thank Heaven she had refused to marry him” (ibid.:45). It is obvious that Clarissa needed someone who could bring some stability to her life, although it is clear that she will always wonder how her life might have been as Peter Walsh’s wife.

From a pragmatic reading, it seems the right option was for Clarissa to get married to Richard Dalloway and reject Peter. References to Clarissa’s delicate health indicate that Richard is a good candidate to take care of her: “For the House sat so long that Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed” (ibid.:30). Richard is aware of Clarissa’s needs, and she has a room of her own, in which she can read till late in a “narrower and narrower” bed (ibid.:30), “and if she raised her head she could just hear the click of the handle released as gently as possible by Richard, who slipped upstairs in his socks and then, as often as not, dropped his hot-water bottle and swore!” (ibid.:31). Richard is a man able to take care of her, and at the same time, he knows to keep a healthy distance from his spouse.

For obvious reasons, I am not going to analyze the possibility of a marriage between Clarissa and Sally Seton in the 1920’s, but I think that is important to pay attention to Clarissa’s feelings toward Sally, and to what was the legal-social-medical frame of same sex relationships. Clarissa’s passion for Sally is patent in her thoughts: “But this question of love (she thought, putting her coat away), this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton (ibid:32).” Clarissa’s

falling in love with Sally Seton has been interpreted as a teenage experience irrelevant to her real sexual orientation. But, if so, how is she, thirty years after the experience, still remembering “the most delicate moment in her life”? (ibid.:33). If it wouldn't have been so relevant why did the author decide to include it in the narration? Clarissa feels a strong passion for Sally Seton and I think that it is not a coincidence that among all the references that are in literature about love, Virginia Woolf decides to use Othello's: “That was her feelings—Othello's feeling, and she felt it, she was convinced, as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it” (ibid.:34). Othello's love for Desdemona embodies the notion of the passionate love that becomes insane, and isn't Clarissa's love an insane one according to the medical parameters of her days?

Woolf was influenced by medical literature about homosexuality written at the onset of the twentieth century. Eileen Barret writes in her article “Unmasking Lesbian Passion,” that Virginia Woolf “was aware of competing discourses about lesbianism and homosexuality” and “was not immune to the prevailing condemnation of homosexuality” (1997: 146-164). It is this lack of immunization that makes the author very cautious about what she writes in her novel, as cautious as Clarissa and Sally are when they decided not to send a letter that they wrote in the intimacy of the attic: “they meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written, though not sent out.”(Woolf 1925:33) They might be anarchists, feminists, or lesbians, but by no means were they going to jeopardize their social comfort. The article written by Jesse Wolfe clearly states that the novel “participates in a modern trend in British and European social thought that combines anti-foundational forebodings with pragmatic-conservative solutions.”(2005:35) “This being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” is the pragmatic-conservative solution for Clarissa, and a mechanism of survival. Virginia Woolf is not so cautious when she writes in her diaries about her own lesbian experiences. One entry written one year and six days after *Mrs. Dalloway's* publication says: “I am amused at my relations with her (Victoria Sackville –West): left so ardent in January – and now what? Also I like her presence & her beauty. Am I in love with her? But what is love? Her being ‘in love’ (it must be comma'd thus) with me, excites & flatters (Woolf,1926:86-87).” I suspect that these doubts are a product of the time in which she was living, as she constantly refers to lesbianism as Sapphist tendencies, trying to ennoble a sexual practice that was seen as pathology, because although she was in contact with lesbian women, there was not at all the social movement that there is today.

Lesbianism in those years was an invisible movement, linked to the marginal, the pathologic, the obscure, and of course, to the anti-foundationalism. The love that dare not speak its name, was, however, often spoken among Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury friends and was not invisible at all. There is evidence of that in Woolf's diaries: "Lytton dined here the other day (...). He is in love again with Philip Ritchie (Woolf, 1924:317)." The tone of the statement shows no surprise, no shock towards the revelation, no evidence that Woolf was scandalized by Lytton Strachey's testimony. Same sex love was something common among some members of the Bloomsbury group that, in some cases like Forster's, was present till they die. Nevertheless, they adopted a pragmatic attitude towards it and were cautious about what they published.

CRITICISM

Along with Woolf's text, I have also used two articles as central points of reference to develop my thesis, Jesse Wolfe's "The Sane Woman in the Attic: Sexuality and Self Authorship in Mrs. Dalloway," and "Unmasking Lesbian Passion" by Eileen Barrett. Wolfe's article points out the two main philosophical attitudes that are present in the novel: the anti-foundationalism and the pragmatism. The tension between these two forces is not only what makes the story revolve, but also a solution to the existential conflict of authors, artists, and common people who embodied what today is defined as queer sexuality. However, Wolfe's article insists in sharing Clarissa's love between Peter Walsh and Richard Dalloway, and defines love for Sally as "a passing phase of late-adolescent lesbian enthusiasm (2005:36)" Although it is true that there is no evidence that might indicate that Clarissa's love for Sally lasted, there is no evidence that Clarissa experienced an intimate and passionate love with men. Saying that Clarissa had a daughter, fruit of her love with Richard Dalloway, might be true, but by no means it had to involve passion. It was a well believed myth until the Enlightenment era that women needed to have an orgasm in order to get pregnant and somehow, there is still the dominant idea that sexual intercourse is always pleasurable (Laqueur). However, we all know that is possible to conceive children without experiencing any physical pleasure.

Therefore, among all the definitions of love, I believe that the one that doesn't involve the "dead of soul"(Woolf, 1925:57) in Clarissa's life is the passionate love. The other definitions of love involve marriage and the death of the soul. The article by Eileen Barrett points out parallelisms in Virginia Woolf's life and Clarissa's life, which might be arguable, but also

highlights that “this romantic friendship also contains a criticism to marriage that Woolf explores throughout the novel”. The institution of marriage, which is a decisive factor that shapes Clarissa’s life, is analyzed in different ways by Wolfe and Barrett in their respective articles. Wolfe’s article points the ambivalence with which marriage is treated, but in the last instance marriage is valuable since it “grants Clarissa’s private life” (2005:38. On the other hand, the article by Barrett highlights all the negative aspects that marriage brings about, and mentions Peter Walsh’s statement “there’s nothing in the world so bad for some women as marriage” (Woolf,1925:40). It makes also reference to how Sally and Clarissa used to talk about marriage as a “catastrophe” (ibid:33). I think that Clarissa’s marriage might be a “catastrophe” for her soul, but I also grant the idea that gives her some kind of support. However, it’s difficult for me to believe that, as Wolf states, marriage was “perhaps where she belongs psychologically,” (Wolfe,2005:42) and even more difficult to believe that “perhaps only a man could satisfy her as a permanent partner”(Ibid:43). There is no satisfaction in Clarissa’s life and it doesn’t seem that a man could satisfy her when “there was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room [...] so the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading, for she sleep badly, she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet.” (ibid:30) This metaphoric and non-metaphoric language shows that Clarissa is unsatisfied with her life and, in my opinion, leaves little space to other interpretations.

CODA

The reading of “The Intentional Fallacy” by Wimsatt and Beardsley made me think about how and why readers and critics might manipulate a sentence or a paragraph in order to fit it within their mental schemes, so the sentence means what the critic or the reader wants it to mean, not what the author intended to say. In this sense, Wimsatt and Beardsley's argument that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art,”(1946:811) therefore even what the author wants to say is irrelevant, and the poem or the literary work should stand and talk by itself. Wimsatt and Beardsley state that if the poem does not succeed in showing what the poet tried to do, then “the critic must go outside the poem,”(ibid:811) with this being a signal that the poem is not good enough in showing its original intention.

Although their argument might make sense, what does happen to the metaphoric language? Why do writers use metaphors, analogies, hyperboles, similes and other figures of speech? One of the answers might lie in the writer's environment, something that is "outside the poem," and it is as simple as taking into consideration the survival of the author. Take for example the spiritual song "Go Down Moses." The song illustrates stories of the last testament and one of the verses sings "let my people go." If we don't look outside of the verse, we will miss the real intentionality of the verse, which is to give hope of freedom to the Afro-American slaves. Negro spirituals were sung and understood by the slave population because they looked "outside the poem,") outside the song.

In my critical approach to *Mrs. Dalloway*, I've tried to remain as close as possible to the original text, keeping in mind however, that sometimes it is necessary to look outside the literary work to understand what was happening between Sally Seton and Clarissa, by taking into account the limits within which Virginia Woolf had to move. As I mentioned in the first part of this essay, sexologists' discourse of the beginning of the twentieth century certainly influenced Virginia Woolf's work, but the legal frame of those years might also have been an influencing factor on her writing. Therefore, wouldn't it be necessary to look outside the work to get a better understanding of it? I certainly believe that it is necessary. I certainly believe that Michael Cunningham's end of the century version of Clarissa Dalloway makes sense. In a world in which the political sphere influences through legislation intimate sexual practices to a high degree (there are still laws that forbid some types of consensual sex), how are those political decisions not going to affect the writing process?

I also devoted time to the study of Virginia Woolf's diaries. The reason why I wanted to read the diaries was to see if there were similarities between Clarissa's and Virginia Woolf's life. I wanted to know if there were lesbian experiences in Woolf's life. I consider connections between the author's life and the novel not only interesting, but relevant to her work. Wimsatt and Beardsley would call this practice author psychology or literary biography. Both authors warn of the "danger of confusing personal and poetic studies"(ibid:814). I don't have any objection to this warning, but I believe that the work of an author is often linked intimately with his or her life. Furthermore, because lesbianism was not yet an acceptable theme in literature, it is difficult to believe that Woolf could write openly about it even if she wanted to. If mine were a study about style, or modernist techniques in literature, I wouldn't have devoted as much time

researching Woolf's diaries, but my focus was on Clarissa's true passion, and trying to make visible what for many is invisible, and trying to make known what to many is unknown.

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