

Mrs. Dalloway: Literary Allusion as Structural Metaphor

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Mrs. Dalloway: Literary Allusion as Structural Metaphor

MRS. DALLOWAY is organized and enriched by literary allusion to a degree unusual even among Virginia Woolf's novels. An allusion to *Cymbeline*, appearing at five key points, supplies the novel's central structure. The lines from the play give Clarissa's experiences coherence and significance. They link events in the lives of different characters. And they create an intricate symbolic system. In addition to the central allusion to *Cymbeline*, dozens of secondary allusions enrich the text. Virginia Woolf draws not only on literary sources, but also on archetypes from folklore and myth. Fairy-tale creatures appear in Clarissa's thoughts. Dying god, earth-mother, and hermaphrodite figures add a mythic dimension to the characters of Septimus, the beggar-woman, and Sally. By pervading present events with echoes of the entire span of western culture, preliterate as well as literary, allusion and mythopoeic image reinforce the novel's underlying theme: continuity between past and present.

Even casual allusions contribute to theme and character. The characters' reading, for example, supports the theme of the diminution of life from past to present. Youthful literary preferences comment ironically on later life and character. Sally Seton, in her youth a champion of Morris and Shelley, marries an immensely successful captain of industry in an apparent repudiation of her youthful radicalism. Peter, his early literary idols eighteenth-century rationalists like Addison and Pope, in middle age falls prey to blinding sentimentality. In her youth Clarissa read poetry and philosophy under the tutelage of Peter and Sally; now she reads only memoirs, skimming the surface of society.

Septimus presents the most extreme example of character created by literary allusion. To Septimus, life is books: he went to war "to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole" (the teacher who first introduced him to Shakespeare).¹ Like the other characters, Septimus thinks of the past as an idyll

contrasted with the present. The "past" he yearns for is not his youth, however, but pastoral Thessaly. When he goes mad he becomes little more than a compilation of literary fragments culled from his voracious reading, various incarnations of the dying god/vicarious sufferer/scapegoat. This is the role he plays in the novel, since in the earlier versions—from which he was absent—Clarissa herself was to commit suicide. In the final version he dies in her place.

His descent into madness is literary too, patterned on the *Inferno*: "each time she sobbed . . . he descended another step into the pit" (p. 136). In the ugliness of his private hell Septimus, like Dante, can perceive only the viciousness of man: "There was . . . Amelia What'shername, . . . a leering, sneering, obscene little harpy; and the Toms and Berties in their starched shirt fronts oozing thick drops of vice" (p. 135). Emerging from madness, he sees innocence and justice personified in Rezia. The scene is permeated with memories of Dante's first view of Matilda, the embodiment of the original innocence of man in Eden (*Purgatorio*, Canto xxviii). Septimus imagines himself in a setting similar to Dante's at the edge of Eden, beside a wood, a light breeze caressing his cheek, the sound of water and the song of birds in the air (pp. 211, 218). He sees his wife through Dante's imagery: "She was a flowering tree; and through her branches looked out the face of a lawgiver" (p. 224). The flowering Tree of Law in Dante's Eden stands for the God-given code of human law restored to its original purity (*Purgatorio*, Canto xxxii). In Septimus' eyes Rezia incorporates the instinctive justice of uncorrupted man. Not just the trip from Hell to Eden, but the whole movement of the *Divine Comedy* provides a model for Septimus' experience. Never in a normal state, he oscillates continually between the horrors of the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso*'s ecstatic harmony with the universe.

Shakespearean allusion gives symbolic dimension to the two figures who present alternative

ways of life to Clarissa: Lady Bruton and Sally Seton. A passage from the party scene establishes Lady Bruton's role:

For she never spoke of England, but this isle of men, this dear, dear land, was in her blood (without reading Shakespeare) . . . she had the thought of Empire always at hand, . . . so that one could not figure her even in death . . . roaming territories over which . . . the Union Jack had ceased to fly. To be not English even among the dead—no, no! Impossible! (pp. 274–75)

Like Lady Bruton, Gaunt in *Richard II* celebrates the England of the past (“this dear, dear land,” II.i.57), which dies with him. Gaunt stands for hereditary succession. His presence often occasions an enumeration of ancestors, as does Lady Bruton's:

Lady Bruton raised the carnations, holding them rather stiffly with much the same attitude with which the General held the scroll in the picture behind her; she remained fixed, tranced. Which was she now, the General's great-grand-daughter? great-great-grand-daughter? Richard Dalloway asked himself. Sir Roderick, Sir Miles, Sir Talbot—that was it. It was remarkable how in that family the likeness persisted in the women. She should have been a general of dragons herself. (pp. 158–59)

Lady Bruton is “fixed, tranced,” frozen in the posture of a former generation that does not meet the demands of modern life. The imagery reinforces her sterile inflexibility: her soul like her bearing resembles a ramrod (pp. 164, 275) and contains a substance “half looking-glass, half precious stone” (p. 165).

In contrast to the inorganic images that describe Lady Bruton, flower imagery surrounds Sally Seton, both as a girl and as a woman. Lady Bruton is linked to a politician and warrior. The young Sally is masculine, too, but a virile lover, not a dying nobleman; she is “handsome,” “wild, . . . daring,” “reckless,” “gallant” (pp. 50, 53, 89, 109). Refusing traditional feminine passivity, she is always performing some daring feat: “She . . . ran along the passage naked . . . bicycled round the parapet on the terrace; smoked cigars” (p. 50). Again and again she tears off the heads of flowers, an act traditionally symbolic of deflowering a virgin. She performs the ritual just before kissing Clarissa (p. 52). She demands passion from everyone: not only chaste Clarissa, but even woodenly correct Hugh Whitbread responds

with a kiss (p. 111). In middle age, when Sally has become a maternal figure with a brood of five sons, the flower imagery reflects the change. Instead of plucking flowers, demanding passion, she now grows them in abundance: “plants, hydrangeas, syringas . . . she . . . had beds of them, positively beds!” (p. 290). Incorporating the two poles of sexuality which together create new life, Sally, like a hermaphrodite, embodies entire the principle of fertility.

The opposition of Lady Bruton and Sally Seton reflects both class conflict and the conflict within Clarissa. Sally repudiates the aristocratic code. As she flouted their rules of polite conduct by running down the hall naked in her youth, she now ignores the punctilio of invitations to Clarissa's party. Worst of all, she has “married beneath her” (p. 290), married a miner's son who has become a wealthy industrialist. The only bourgeois among Clarissa's friends, she is also the only fertile one. Following the passage describing Lady Bruton's aristocratic place “among the dead” comes Sally's boast: “I have five enormous boys!” (pp. 261, 284).

Lady Bruton and Sally Seton typify the two sides of Clarissa's experience: her social world and her emotional life. That Clarissa associates Sally with passion becomes clear when she quotes *Othello*:

[Clarissa] could remember going cold with excitement, and doing her hair in a kind of ecstasy (now the old feeling began to come back to her . . .) and feeling as she crossed the hall “if it were now to die 'twere now to be most happy.” That was her feeling—Othello's feeling, and she felt it, she was convinced, as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it, all because she was coming down to dinner in a white frock to meet Sally Seton! (p. 51)

To express what Sally means to her, Clarissa chooses the words of a man at the height of love, dwells on “feeling,” and talks of “excitement,” “ecstasy.” Yet she renounces all this in the name of Lady Bruton's social code.

It was at Bourton that summer. . . . They were talking about a man who had married his housemaid. . . . Then somebody said—Sally Seton it was—did it make any real difference to one's feelings to know that before they'd married she had had a baby? (In those days, in mixed company, it was a bold thing to say.) He could see Clarissa now, turning bright pink; somehow contracting; and saying, “Oh, I shall never be able to

“speak to her again!” . . . it was her manner that annoyed him; timid; hard; something arrogant; unimaginative; prudish. “The death of the soul.” [Peter] had said that instinctively, ticketing the moment as he used to do—the death of her soul. . . . Then Clarissa, still with an air of being offended with them all, got up, made some excuse, and went off, alone. (pp. 88–90)

Sally characteristically ignores the rules of polite conversation to stress feelings and to accept the reproduction of life regardless of social opinion. Clarissa adopts Lady Bruton’s rigidity. She eventually rejects Sally for marrying beneath her as she rejects the country gentleman’s *mésalliance*. Peter is right to label the moment “the death of the soul.” Clarissa gives the signal for her life’s direction, away from Sally, source of vitality and passion, toward the deadening aristocratic society of Lady Bruton. Only at the end, after Lady Bruton has sent her into the chill world of death through a social snub, does Sally’s presence rekindle life and feeling in Clarissa.

The Shakespearean quotation that unites the ideas of life and death comes from *Cymbeline*:

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,
Nor the furious winter’s rages.
(iv.ii.258–59)

In the play the dirge is sung over the body of Imogen. But her “show of death” is only a “locking-up the spirits for a time, / To be more fresh, reviving” (i.v.40–42). Reverberations of this death and resurrection pattern echo in the words or deeds of nearly everyone in *Cymbeline*. The last scene is saturated with it. Imogen is about to be killed as a Roman prisoner when Cymbeline commands, “Live!” (v.v.97). Disguised as Fidele, she suffers at the hands of Posthumus a symbolic death marked by Pisanio: “You ne’er killed Imogen till now” (v.v.232). Imogen rises from the blow in her own character, reborn to Posthumus, who thought her dead. Posthumus is reborn to Imogen, who believes she has buried him, and Arviragus and Guiderius are reborn to the King after having been dead to him for twenty years. Cymbeline celebrates the rebirth of his entire family at the end of the play: “O! what, am I / A mother to the birth of three?” (v.v.369–70).

So in *Mrs. Dalloway* the theme of death and rebirth radiates from the experiences of various characters to converge on a last scene of rebirth. Seeming digressions actually vary the theme. In

Peter’s dream vision (pp. 85–88) (which seems, as Reuben A. Brower says, “merely beautiful, a piece which could be detached with little loss”)² a monumental woman compounded of sky, trees, and ocean, representing the unity of existence beyond the individual life, tempts the sleeper to leave the multiplicity of this life for the “one thing” that embraces all. He turns away from the “fever of living” to address the figure with a death wish: “let me blow to nothingness with the rest.” But he reverses himself, returning from the darkness of the forest to the light of his sitting-room to embrace his landlady, who represents the ordinary life of this world. The symbolic vocabulary of the dreamer’s annihilation and return links them to Clarissa’s and Septimus’ experiences of death and rebirth. They too see life and death as light and darkness; they too flee the agitations of life, the “heat” of life, to find unity and peace through the annihilation of the individual. And the same joy in ordinary things marks their return to life.

Like the dream vision, the song of the beggar-woman seems a self-enclosed interlude:

A sound interrupted him . . . the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth . . . Through all ages . . . the battered woman . . . stood singing of love—love which has lasted a million years, she sang, love which prevails, and millions of years ago, her lover, who had been dead these centuries, had walked, she crooned, with her in May; but in the course of ages, long as summer days, and flaming, she remembered, with nothing but red asters, he had gone; death’s enormous sickle had swept those tremendous hills, and when at last she laid her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth, now become a mere cinder of ice . . . the pageant of the universe would be over.

As the ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent’s Park Tube station still the earth seemed green and flowery; still, though it issued from so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling bubbling song . . . streamed away in rivulets, . . . fertilising, leaving a damp stain.

Still remembering how once in some primeval May she had walked with her lover, this rusty pump, this battered old woman . . . would still be there in ten million years. (pp. 122–24)

So the earth-mother mourns her dead lover in the Adonis lament. The images identify woman and earth: her mouth is a hole in the ground, her

song the life-giving stream which springs from the earth. Ageless and sexless, fertility itself, she rises above personal identity to embody the earth-mother whose archetype underlies the myths of Ishtar and Aphrodite. The song is dominated by imagery of the seasons, whose cycle corresponds to the presence and absence of the lover. She and her lover were together in spring, but he disappeared in summer ("ages long as summer days"), and with him disappeared the life of nature: "death's enormous sickle had swept those tremendous hills." The cycle appears to end in winter and death, but spring imagery surges up in the following paragraph, the repetition of "still" emphasizing the perpetuity of spring's victory over winter: "still the earth seemed green and flowery." The human cycle repeats the seasonal pattern: "the passing generations . . . vanished, like leaves, to be trodden under, to be soaked and steeped and made mould of by that eternal spring" (p. 124). Although the interlude seems to end with the dying generations, the last word promises renewal. It fuses all the meanings attached to "spring" throughout the passage: the beggar-woman's song, the water that quickens the earth, and the season of new life. All three are "eternal" manifestations of nature's regenerative power.

Underlying the beggar's lover is the same archetype that informs Septimus' character: the dying god. "The flesh was melted off the world. [Septimus'] body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock. . . . The earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head" (pp. 102–03). Septimus' connection with the earth suggests a nature deity. He makes no distinction between himself and the world of nature: flowers growing through the ground grow through his body as well. Red flowers sprout from his flesh as from Adonis' blood. Adonis was once worshiped as a tree spirit.³ Vestiges of his origin appear in the myth of his birth from a tree.⁴ Septimus, too, feels a kinship with trees, "the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body" (p. 32). And prominent among his "messages" to mankind are "trees are alive" (pp. 32, 102); "men must not cut down trees" (pp. 35, 224).

He identifies himself as "Septimus, lately taken from life to death, the Lord who had come to renew society, . . . the scapegoat, the eternal suf-

ferer" (p. 37). The scapegoat of tradition has a dual function: to purify the community by taking its sins upon himself, dying to expiate them, and to embody the vegetation god who must be killed so that his fertilizing spirit may enter the new vegetation of spring. In both roles the scapegoat sacrifices himself for the community. So Septimus thinks "the whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes" (p. 140). Death is not what Septimus wants, but what "human nature" (p. 145) wants from him.

There remained only the . . . tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his. . . . He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did *they* want? . . . "I'll give it you!" he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings. (p. 226)

Even at the moment of death Septimus makes a literary distinction, between "their idea of tragedy" and the real thing. The imprecation "I'll give it you!" applies in its literal sense. As scapegoat Septimus gives his life for the renewal of human nature.

Septimus' suicide develops the paradox of the dying-god myth: the man-god's death is life-giving. His affirmation of life, "Life was good," is followed by a "vigorous" leap into death. And the act of jumping through a window implies, within the novel's pattern of imagery, the opposite of death. Clarissa speaks of Septimus' death as a "plunge" (p. 281), connecting the suicide with water. She takes a similar plunge as the novel begins:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when . . . she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. . . . the air was . . . like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet . . . solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen. (p. 3)

The first page of the novel poses the two polar images of Clarissa's existence.⁵ Her "plunge" into the open air signifies her immersion in the whole of life, represented by the ocean; when she is thus submerged life appears benevolent, "kissing" her as it envelops her. But the opposite emotion, the fear of "something awful about to happen," holds her back. Dread of life's dangers

leads her to take refuge within the house, separated from life by the window. Throughout the book the window stands for separation, the ocean for the totality of existence. Septimus shares Clarissa's vacillation between union with life and withdrawal. His "plunge" through the window, like hers, represents a triumph over the fear that would keep both of them on the safe side of the window.⁶

During his lifetime Septimus identified himself with "the drowned sailor," symbol in Eliot's *Wasteland* (l. 47) and elsewhere of the fertility god annually thrown into the sea to secure rain for the crops. After his death Rezia confirms the link between Septimus and the vegetation god: she sees him in the ocean and at the same time envisions "rain falling, . . . stirrings among dry corn" (p. 228). Rezia's visions also supply a metaphorical equivalent of the fertility god's rebirth. They come not from her own experience, but from Septimus' thoughts. The visionary part of him lives on in her. She imagines the two of them on a "hill, somewhere near the sea, for there were ships, gulls, butterflies," and wonders where it could have been (p. 228). The source: Septimus' vision of himself as the drowned sailor lying on a cliff overhanging the sea, surrounded by gulls (p. 213). Window imagery indicates that Rezia, like Septimus, overcomes the separation between the self and surrounding life: "It seemed to her . . . that she was opening long windows, stepping out into some garden. But where?" (p. 227). She re-creates the scene of Clarissa's initial plunge through the French windows into the garden at Bourton. Like Septimus and Clarissa, Rezia feels enfolded by the ocean, image of universal life: "the caress of the sea . . . hollowing them in its arched shell" (p. 228). Once a character breaks through the walls of the self into the whole of existence, other peoples' thoughts enter his consciousness. In the one enveloping life which all share there are no barriers.

Since Septimus becomes Clarissa's alter ego in death, their thoughts are especially close. Mutual images of offering, death, and rebirth pave the way for the connection between Septimus' death and Clarissa's reconsecration to life. Septimus sacrifices himself to the life-force; Clarissa conceives of her parties as an offering to life. "'That's what I do it for,' she said, speaking aloud, to life. . . . it was an offering; . . . it was her gift"

(pp. 184–85). With the ambiguity of "give" in Septimus' last words, "gift" means both talent and contribution.

Septimus experiences life as a series of deaths and rebirths. Similar patterns link these cycles to Clarissa's retreats from and returns to life. Fear of "something tremendous about to happen" (p. 104) transfixes Septimus; the same fear of "something awful about to happen" holds Clarissa back from life on the first page. Whenever life threatens, Septimus shuts his eyes: "the excitement of the elm trees . . . would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more" (p. 32). Clarissa's retreat takes the same form (pp. 18, 42).

In the opposite mood of acceptance, Clarissa and Septimus perceive life as harmonious, its order represented by the same rhythm of "rising and falling." Thus at Bourton on that first morning and again in the perfect moment of her love for Sally, Clarissa sees the rooks rising and falling (pp. 3, 51). Septimus acknowledges "the sparrows fluttering, rising and falling" as "part of the pattern" (pp. 32–33) nature presents to him when he can abandon himself to her. Clarissa and Septimus surrender their defenses to the enveloping current of life as they sit in their drawing rooms, she sewing, he watching Rezia make a hat. Rising and falling dominate both scenes, Clarissa seeing the rise and fall of waves, Septimus the alternation of light and shadow on the wall:

waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. (pp. 58–59)

Going and coming . . . so the light and shadow which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now made the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus. (p. 211)

The extension of the rhythm of nature to the rhythm of the words indicates its pervasiveness in Clarissa's and Septimus' consciousness, their acceptance and absorption of the cyclical movement of life. The countercurrents of immersion and withdrawal that pull them apart give way to a regular rise and fall, contradictory movements harmoniously united. In a world so governed by order and design that even the swallows do not fling themselves here and there at random but are

"always [in] perfect control as if elastics held them" (p. 104), no arbitrary stroke of fate, no "something terrible about to happen" is possible. Freed from fear, Clarissa and Septimus can abandon themselves to life.

The most important death and rebirth symbols Clarissa and Septimus share are cold and the heat of the sun. When Septimus refuses life he is "a snow blanket" (p. 37). Clarissa also imagines death as wintry and frozen, with "icy claws" (p. 54). The heat of the sun, on the other hand, pulls Septimus toward life as he reenacts the death and rebirth of the drowned sailor (pp. 104–05). Once he has reached the "shores of life," the sun renders life not frightening but friendly: "streamers of sunlight fawned at his feet." The sun also signals the delights of life: "the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper." The sun's heat dominates Clarissa's picture of life too: "the presence of this thing [life] which she felt to be so obvious became physically existent; with robes of sound from the street, sunny, with hot breath, whispering, blowing out the blinds" (p. 184).

The *Cymbeline* citation's heat o' the sun and winter's cold provide the symbols for Clarissa's recurrent simulation of death and rebirth: she throws herself into the heat of life, suffers, and retreats to a cold place in a continual movement from passion to calm, from life to death. In the first of these cycles Clarissa plunges into the life of the world:

In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs . . . was what she loved; life. (p. 5)

The throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body. The sun became extraordinarily hot. (p. 20)

Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that. (p. 9)

The streets become the hot body of life, the automobile engines its pulse, the breeze a divine vitality that animates and connects all things. When she participates fully in the life of the world, Clarissa sees disparate objects linked and herself

linked to them by the same current of life. But hard upon joy in life comes hatred for Miss Kilman. So she escapes from the emotions generated by life in the streets to the eye-closing coolness of the flower shop:

she stood, . . . her eyes half closed, snuffing in, after the street uproar, the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness . . . as if this beauty . . . were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when—oh! a pistol shot in the street outside! (pp. 18–19)

The life of the world breaks in like a shot, and the cycle starts again.

After her walk to the flower shop Clarissa leaves the heat of the streets to enter her house: "The hall of the house was cool as a vault. Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and . . . she felt like a nun who has left the world. . . . Lucy, . . . taking Mrs. Dalloway's parasol, handled it like a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds" (pp. 42–44). The mock-heroic diction—her parasol a sacred weapon against the heat of the sun—subjects Clarissa's struggle to ironic reduction, showing the triviality of her conflicts in contrast to Septimus' ordeals. Again she shuts out the world by raising her hand to her eyes. But worldly life, in the form of Lady Bruton's luncheon, shatters her calm. And again she retreats: "Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs" (p. 45).

Although less explicitly than the nun and vault images, the child exploring a tower implies both sexual refusal and death. Clarissa's meeting with Peter elaborates the image:

all in a clap it came over her, If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day! . . . It was all over for her. The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow. She had gone up into the tower alone and left them blackberrying in the sun. The door had shut, and there among the dust of fallen plaster and the litter of birds' nests how distant the view had looked, and the sounds came thin and chill (once on Leith Hill, she remembered) . . . I am alone for ever, she thought. (p. 70)

In giving up Peter, Clarissa renounced the passionate intimacy he would have demanded. The imagery of her childhood memory reflects her choice: she leaves the heat of the sun for the chill of the tower, the fruits of summer for the birds'

nesses, not full of new life but decaying, the community of nature for somber solitude. Death and sterility fuse most completely in the imagery of sheet and bed:

"Fear no more," said Clarissa. Fear no more the heat o' the sun; for the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the moment in which she had stood shiver. . . . she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life. . . . She began to go slowly upstairs, with her hand on the bannisters, as if she had left a party . . . and gone out and stood alone, a single figure against the appalling night, or rather, to be accurate, against the stare of this matter-of-fact June morning. . . . she paused by the open staircase window which . . . let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her.

Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs. . . . There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. . . . The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be. . . . Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed. And really she preferred to read of the retreat from Moscow. He knew it. So the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading, for she slept badly, she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet. Lovely in girlhood, suddenly there came a moment—for example on the river beneath the woods at Cliveden—when, through some contraction of this cold spirit, she had failed him. And then at Constantinople, and again and again. She could see what she lacked. It was . . . something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman. (pp. 44–46)

Clarissa's exaggerated response to being left out of Lady Bruton's luncheon does not merely comment on the disproportionate value Clarissa sets on social life. The party symbolizes life. To leave a party is to leave life, to face alone "the appalling night" of death. Missing Lady Bruton's luncheon means a "dwindling of life." In opposition to the immersion in "life; London; this moment in June" (p. 5) that she felt earlier in the morning, Clarissa now stands "against" the June morning. It "stares" at her from a distance rather than enveloping her. The window stands between

Clarissa and life, and here the separation it represents becomes explicit when "out of the window" is linked with "out of her body and brain."

Again Clarissa leaves the burgeoning life of nature to climb to an attic room, simultaneously the tower of death on Leith Hill, a nun's cell, and the attic bedroom of Clarissa's virginal girlhood. All are places of isolation and sterility. Because of Clarissa's sexual refusal, "there was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room." Lack of substance at the heart of life puts life itself in jeopardy. Death and frigidity coalesce in the images of sheet and bed. Clarissa's bed is narrow because she sleeps alone, but it will become "narrower and narrower" as she goes from her present isolation to the absolute isolation of the coffin. The white sheet, identified with virginity through the simile ("the virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet"), also suggests a winding-sheet. Repudiation of sex is a repudiation of the life-force and is part of Clarissa's inclination toward death.

Clarissa will tolerate a relationship with a man only if, like Richard, he plays a purely protective role. Clarissa manages to convert even Peter into a protective spirit while he is away: the words he taught her "started up every day of her life as if he guarded her" (p. 54). But when he appears at her door he changes from defender to invader, and Clarissa reacts to his entrance with the excessive indignation his interruption always provokes: "It was outrageous to be interrupted. . . . She made to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy" (p. 59). Throughout the meeting, sexual protection is at least a subliminal element of Clarissa's defense against Peter's invasion. Peter's pocketknife is a phallic symbol incorporating the threat Clarissa attaches to sex, as well as an emblem of his habitual behavior toward her, breaking into her privacy, lacerating her with criticism, and ripping open the civilized surface of life that protects her from emotion. Clarissa is armed with a needle, which she wields defensively to avoid the emotional confrontation Peter demands:

taking up her needle, [she] summoned, like a Queen whose guards have fallen asleep and left her unprotected (she had been quite taken aback by this visit—it had upset her) so that any one can stroll in and have a look at her where she lies with the brambles curving over her, summoned to her help the things she did; the

things she liked; . . . all to come about her and beat off the enemy. (pp. 65–66)

Clarissa shares Septimus' inclination for self-dramatization and his aptitude for building a self out of literary memories. Since she is not a reader, Clarissa's images come from the fairy tales of childhood. Sleeping Beauty provides a figure of threatened delicacy and purity. The parallel is ironic. In the fairy tale the princess' defense, the impenetrable forest, opens at the prince's appearance. The princess waits only to be awakened to consummated love. Clarissa refuses to be awakened.

The heat-cold imagery originating in the lines from *Cymbeline* and elaborated to symbolize the opposition between passion and frigidity, life and death, culminates in the party scene. The rebirth Clarissa experiences there begins with a transformation of her emotional nature.

At the beginning of the party Clarissa is simply the hostess: "It was too much like being—just anybody, standing there; anybody could do it; yet this anybody she did a little admire, couldn't help feeling that . . . it marked a stage, this post she felt herself to have become, for oddly enough she had quite forgotten what she looked like, but felt herself a stake driven in at the top of her stairs" (p. 259). One of the links between Clarissa and Septimus has been their mutual identification with the vital spirit of trees. Now Clarissa has become a lifeless piece of wood, spiritually barren. Her identity at this "stage" submerged in the role of hostess, she cannot remember what she looks like, and she does not think and feel as herself, but as someone looking at Clarissa Dalloway.

The pinnacle of Clarissa's career as hostess comes when the Prime Minister himself chooses to be her guest: "And now Clarissa escorted her Prime Minister down the room. . . . There was a breath of tenderness; her severity, her prudery, her woodenness were all warmed through now, and she had about her . . . an inexpressible dignity; an exquisite cordiality; as if she wished the whole world well, and must now, being on the very verge and rim of things, take her leave" (pp. 264–65). Perfectly successful as a hostess both professionally (entertaining the Prime Minister) and personally (embodying the perfection of social grace), Clarissa stands ready for the next "stage." She stands, too, "on the very verge and rim of things," suggesting her imminent departure

from society in terms reminiscent of Septimus, the drowned sailor "on the edge of the world" (p. 140). So Virginia Woolf points forward to her identification with his plunge into the life beyond.

The wood imagery indicates the cause of Clarissa's transformation. At first a lifeless post, her feeling for Sally has "kindled" her: "Clarissa loved [Sally] for being still like that. 'I can't believe it!' she cried, kindling all over with pleasure" (p. 261). No longer is she the wooden effigy of a hostess: "her woodenness [was] all warmed through now." This metaphorical rise in temperature corresponds to the emergence of Clarissa's feelings from beneath the mask of the society hostess. She not only recaptures her love for Sally, but also accepts her hatred for Miss Kilman.

Miss Kilman embodies the passion Clarissa denies in herself. She is hot; she perspires; "bitter and burning," she is filled with "hot and turbulent feelings" (p. 188). Her emotions are visceral: "Elizabeth . . . went off, drawing out, so Miss Kilman felt, the very entrails in her body, stretching them as she crossed the room, and then, with a final twist . . . she went" (p. 201). She loves Elizabeth with consuming passion: "If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and forever and then die" (pp. 199–200). The same passionate excess and the same desire for mastery characterize her hatred for Clarissa:

there rose in her an overmastering desire to overcome [Clarissa]; to unmask her. If she could have felled her it would have eased her. . . . If only she could make her weep; could ruin her; humiliate her; bring her to her knees. . . . Odd it was, as Miss Kilman stood there (and stand she did, with the power and taciturnity of some prehistoric monster armoured for primeval warfare), how, second by second, the idea of her diminished, how hatred . . . crumbled, how she lost her malignity, her size, became second by second merely Miss Kilman, in a mackintosh. . . . At this dwindling of the monster, Clarissa laughed. Saying good-bye, she laughed. (pp. 189–90)

In this battle a prehistoric monster embodying primitive force and passion confronts a representative of civilized humanity. In Clarissa's laughter the comic spirit of civilized society triumphs.

The image of a primeval monster as brute passion first appears in Clarissa's thoughts about Miss Kilman during her morning walk:

It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her

this brutal monster! to hear twigs cracking and feel hooves planted down in the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul; never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred, which . . . made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots, as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self-love! this hatred! (p. 17)

Primitive and civilized battle again, this time within Clarissa's soul, but the monster of brute passion is "this hatred," not Miss Kilman. United by the image of the monster, Clarissa's hatred and its object, Miss Kilman, become synonymous. The dwelling place of primitive passion is the "depths" and "roots" of Clarissa's being, a Freudian id fittingly represented by a primeval jungle. The dark roots contrast with the blossoms of civilized life above the surface, "pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in . . . making her home delightful," which her hatred, "grubbing at the roots," disturbs.

At her party Clarissa finally comes to terms with the Kilman in herself:

walking down the room with [the Prime Minister, Clarissa] had felt that intoxication of the moment . . . still these semblances, these triumphs . . . had a hollowness; at arm's length they were, not in the heart; . . . they satisfied her no longer as they used; and suddenly . . . the Sir Joshua picture of the little girl with a muff brought back Kilman with a rush; Kilman her enemy. That was satisfying; that was real. Ah, how she hated her—hot, hypocritical, corrupt; with all that power; Elizabeth's seducer; the woman who had crept in to steal and defile. . . . She hated her: she loved her. It was enemies one wanted, not friends—not Mrs. Durrant and Clara, Sir William and Lady Bradshaw, Miss Truelock and Eleanor Gibson (whom she saw coming upstairs). They must find her if they wanted her. She was for the party! (pp. 265–66)

To reject her triumph with the Prime Minister is to deny her old values. Clarissa quickly puts her rejection of society's standards into action by throwing the amenities to the wind, refusing to play the wooden hostess greeting her guests at the top of the stairs. She gives up the artifice of civilization designed to keep chaotic and antisocial feelings below the surface, to accept hatred ("she hated her") and to embrace primitive emotion in the figure of Miss Kilman ("she loved her"). Now Clarissa is "for the party," no longer dreading the

strong feelings that total participation in life awakens.

The dress imagery traces Clarissa from acceptance to rejection of society's values. As N. C. Thakur has observed,⁷ Clarissa's dress is a symbol of "the perfect hostess" (pp. 9, 10, 93). The dress shines in artificial light but looks drab in the sunlight (p. 55), as Clarissa's social self glows at parties but seems shallow in the light of life's larger concerns. Peter, when he sees her in the afternoon, despises the dress as the emblem of the society woman he hates in Clarissa: "Here she is mending her dress; mending her dress as usual, he thought; here she's been sitting all the time I've been in India; mending her dress; playing about; going to parties; running to the House and back and all that, he thought, growing more and more irritated, more and more agitated" (p. 61). But when he sees her in her dress at the party he cannot help being dazzled: "And now Clarissa escorted her Prime Minister down the room, prancing, sparkling. . . . She wore . . . a silver-green mermaid's dress. Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses she seemed, . . . with the most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element" (p. 264). This apotheosis of "the perfect hostess" becomes an apotheosis of the dress: it is a "mermaid's dress," and it imposes its qualities on Clarissa's movements and personality.

In her last retreat from life, Clarissa experiences the encounter with death she imagined in the morning (p. 45). She leaves the intensified life of the party for the solitude of death, "this profound darkness" (p. 282). She sheds her old self, "the perfect hostess," in a buried-dress metaphor: "She went on, into the little room. . . . The party's splendor fell to the floor, so strange it was to come in alone" (pp. 279–80). She looks back at her social career with new eyes: "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success. Lady Bexborough and the rest of it" (p. 282). From the perspective of Septimus' refusal of contamination, the dress hangs heavy with the sins of Clarissa's social ambition. In a total reversal of her old values she repudiates the exemplar of aristocratic society, "the woman she admired most, Lady Bexborough"

(p. 13). And she also repudiates what she admired in her, the suppression of feeling in favor of empty social gesture. Lady Bexborough's share in the novel is limited to one action: "Lady Bexborough . . . opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed" (p. 5).

Clarissa feels her way into Septimus' state of mind through the memory of a moment when she, too, had welcomed death: "There was an embrace in death. 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,' she had said to herself once, coming down in white" (p. 281). The rest of the sentence from which Clarissa quotes explains Othello's willing acceptance of death:

If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

(*Othello* II.i.189–93)

Othello speaks these words just before the consummation of his marriage to Desdemona. Clarissa echoes him just before the kiss that stands as the consummation of her relationship with Sally. Both loves are purest and most intense just before fulfillment. At the moment of consummation the world intrudes: as Iago's brawl breaks in on Othello and Desdemona, Peter interrupts Sally and Clarissa. The moment of perfect intimacy never recurs. Now middle age has taken "the lustre . . . out of [Sally]" (p. 260) and out of Clarissa's response to her. Death alone preserves love from time. "There was an embrace in death," the perfect unity of Septimus and Rezia after Septimus' suicide. Clarissa could have preserved her integrity (the "treasure") and "the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally" (p. 50) only by acting out Othello's words when she spoke them at Bourton, plunging like Septimus into death.

Having understood Septimus' suicide through a projection of her own feelings, Clarissa feels Septimus' loneliness, his fear, and his rejection of Bradshaw's domination. The old lady in the house next door symbolizes through her gestures the change that empathy makes in Clarissa. Clarissa first observed her during the afternoon: "Somehow one respected that—that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she

was being watched. There was something solemn in it—but love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul. . . . the supreme mystery . . . was simply this: here was one room; there another" (pp. 191–93). The old woman represents the privacy of the soul. She has lived beside Clarissa "ever so many years" (p. 192), yet they have never spoken. She is separated from Clarissa and the rest of the world by her window. To Clarissa this separation is sacred. The miracle of life is not only the existence of a person, but the separate existence of a person: "here was one room; there another." But now Clarissa has overcome self-confinement through a total identification with another person. Before, the old woman had looked "out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched," oblivious to everyone. Now "the old lady stared straight at her" (p. 283). The old woman whose isolation figured forth the absolute privacy of the soul overcomes the barriers of separation between people (the windows) to reach another human being, as Clarissa has just annihilated the barriers of the self to join Septimus. The end of the emblem of privacy in a symbolic act of communion signifies the end of Clarissa's insistence on isolation and self-containment.

Clarissa's final perception of the unity of life and death draws together symbols from the whole novel:

It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. (p. 283)

The old lady going "quite quietly" to bed stands for the tranquillity that results from holding oneself aloof from the active life; the noise of the party represents the life of the world; and Clarissa sees retreat from life and participation in life in a single vision. The darkness of death envelops the house, side by side with life, "with all this going on," as thoughts of Septimus' death are punctuated by the clock proclaiming the life of the present. Clarissa can now integrate retreat and involve-

ment, death and life, "[losing] herself in the process of living" (p. 282).

"Process of living" (like "all this going on") sends us back to the procession of people through the streets that represents the stream of human life always "going on" in spite of individual deaths: "this voice, pouring endlessly, year in year out, would take whatever it might be; this vow; this van; this life; this procession, would wrap them all about and carry them on" (pp. 209–10). When Clarissa first saw the phrase, "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," she was swept up in just such a procession: "this body . . . seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being . . . only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street" (p. 14). At the first appearance of "Fear no more" (as at the last) Clarissa has a sense of life and death as interlocking halves of one whole:

what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab. Did it matter then . . . that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home . . . part of people she had never met . . . it spread ever so far, her life, herself. . . . she read in the book spread open:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun
Nor the furious winter's rages.
(pp. 12–13)

As only a drop in the ocean of existence instead of an individual with an identity to lose, Clarissa accepts life and death as the inevitable "ebb and flow" of the ocean to which she belongs, fearing neither the heat of life nor the winter of death. She does not pity Septimus for the same reason that she does not fear her own death: because he survives as part of the flow of existence.

In its second appearance (p. 44) "Fear no more" exorcises fear. But on the next two occasions the allusion again coincides with the sea of existence. The third instance occurs in Clarissa's thoughts, the fourth in Septimus':

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves col-

lect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying "that is all" more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (pp. 58–59)

Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more.

He was not afraid. At every moment Nature signified by . . . Shakespeare's words, her meaning. (pp. 211–12)

The collective sea, the unity of all things, brings together the most disparate phenomena: the green folds of Clarissa's dress become waves, the rhythm of her needle the rhythm of the ocean, and her sitting room in London the seashore; the ocean of Septimus' vision unites air and water, birds and waves, the outside with the interior of his room, his sofa with the ocean. And Clarissa and Septimus, too, are parts of the whole. Giving up the burden of their separate egos to the whole of life, they "fear no more" either life or death.

The final repetition of "Fear no more" recalls the moment when Septimus and Clarissa, open to the whole of existence, were also open to each other, when Clarissa was indeed "part of people she had never met." But the difference between their visions persists: although Clarissa's heart committed itself to the collective sea, her body remained on the beach. Septimus was in the water.⁸

Clarissa's final repetition of "Fear no more" is both a farewell to Septimus and an affirmation of his continued existence. It is on one hand a funeral song in the spirit of the original dirge, telling Septimus that he need fear no more the ravages of life and human beings. On the other hand, it sounds the note of death followed by new life, the theme of *Cymbeline*. As Clarissa captures his thoughts and feelings, Septimus lives again in her, as he does in all things.

"Fear no more" also proclaims the disappearance of Clarissa's fear, both of life and of death. All day death has hung over her, both alternative and threat. Now she experiences death through Septimus. Having passed through death, Clarissa need fear it no more. Nor does she fear life. As the clock strikes, proclaiming a new hour to be lived, Clarissa decides "she must go back" to the party, to life. After vacillating all day between absorption in life and deathlike withdrawal, she commits herself to life. Clarissa attributes her new zest for life to Septimus: "She felt glad that he had done

it; thrown it away. . . . He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (pp. 283–84). Completing his archetypal role as dying god, Septimus' death is life-giving. Clarissa reenters the world radiating life, renewing it in her turn:

What is this ecstasy? [Peter] thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?

It is Clarissa, he said.

For there she was. (p. 296)⁹

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Notes

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, 1925), p. 130. Subsequent references are to this edition.

² *The Fields of Light* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 135.

³ Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), v, 233.

⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* x.505–14.

⁵ For a brilliant exposition of the two extremes of Mrs. Dalloway's attitude toward life, see Brower, pp. 125–30; he presents an analysis of the "plunge" imagery on pp. 136–37.

⁶ As James Hafley says in *The Glass Roof*, "It is his love of life, his belief in unity, then, that Septimus affirms by casting away his physical individuality" (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1954), p. 64.

⁷ *The Symbolism of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 70.

⁸ Josephine Schaefer, *The Three-Fold Nature of Reality* (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), p. 104.

⁹ My thanks to Richard Lanham for his generous contributions to this article and to Nancy Bryan for her insights into *Mrs. Dalloway*.