Reclaiming identity- Sexuality in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Abstract

The repression and denial of sexuality in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* conveys the way sexuality was perceived in the 1920s; Woolf addresses some of these issues and attempts to show how they affected different people. Using articles written by Jesse Wolfe, James Schiff and Suzan Harrison I argue how sexuality and identity are connected. *Mrs. Dalloway* is considered Woolf's first successful modernist text. Elizabeth Meese's description of female sexuality as the site of rebellion is pertinent, as is her assertion that Sally Seton's kiss with Clarissa breaks up the traditional storyline of masculine desire.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* follows a day in the life of the upper-class Clarissa Dalloway in post-First World War England. Woolf uses a third person omniscient narration to enter the minds of her characters, travelling backwards and forwards in time to construct an image of Clarissa's life, and the workings of society after the war. Woolf fills this short novel with an array of issues - homosexuality, mental illness, feminism and sexuality to name but a few. I'll focus first on the theme of sexuality, which is defined as the 'capacity for sexual feelings, a person's sexual orientation, preference and sexual activity'.[1] Because of this, sexuality and identity are closely linked and it is possible for one to lose their identity if their sexuality is denied or repressed. Using the portrayal of the marriage between Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, as well as Clarissa and Sally Seton's kiss and Septimus's fixation on his commanding officer Evans I will demonstrate how the literary text suggests that the denial of sexuality can create lasting problems and the embracing of sexuality enable reclaiming of identity.

The title of the book points to the loss of Clarissa's identity right away. Due to her gender, Clarissa is known not as herself but only by her husband's last name. Woolf develops Clarissa's character throughout the novel using marriage and sexuality; via her affection for Peter and her memory of kissing Sally Seaton, Clarissa can be viewed as a strong female character that rebels against the idea that female sexuality is 'monogamous and heterosexual'.[2] However, it is also easy to see her as a traditional house wife, taking on the role of the home and inhabiting 'separate matrimonial spheres'.[3] 'Separate spheres'

[1] [1] 'Oxford University Press' < https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/liberating> [accessed 16 January 2018].

[2] Jesse, Wolfe, 'The sane Woman in The Attic: Sexuality and Self-Authorship in *Mrs. Dalloway*' *Modern Fiction Studies,* 51.1 (2005).

[3] Wolfe, 'The sane Woman in The Attic'.

suggests the idea that a woman's concern is the home, children and religion, while it is down to the men to take care of business and politics. Throughout the novel Clarissa often embodies the 'perfect housewife' role; the house is her domain and she is free to decorate it as she pleases, for example with flowers. However, although she complies with her housewife duties she is still able to gain some control and independence via the parties she throws. It is through these actions that she can rebel against her role as Mrs. Dalloway, a mother and wife, and become Clarissa.

While being a victim of repression, Clarissa is also completely indifferent to the struggles and hunger of the working women. The opening line of the novel addresses Clarissa's 'perfect housewife' life: 'she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her'.[4] Here we gain insight into the woman that Clarissa is as we know that she has a servant, Lucy, and so is clearly an upper-class woman. Her obvious belief that she is doing Lucy a favour in obtaining her own flowers is another example of how blind she is when it comes to the hardships of working women. It should also be noted that she is taking on this job herself to further decorate her home.

Both Clarissa and Sally have their sexuality repressed by entering into marriage, something they both feared prior to growing up, speaking of marriage 'always as a catastrophe'[5] stemming from a knowledge that it would 'part them'.[6] Thirty-four years before *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place the two shared a kiss that Clarissa remembers as one of the happiest moments of her life, and admits that she feels for Sally 'as men feel'.[7] These feelings are not recognized as a sign of homosexuality or bisexuality. There are small references to this behaviour throughout the novel; Clarissa is considering 'falling in love with women'[8] and thinks back to Sally, questioning whether that had been love. However, she is continuously unsure of the depth of her feelings, as homosexuality was illegal and not to be discussed shown through her mother who refused to talk of such things.

Elizabeth Meese describes feminine sexuality as the site of rebellion:

'Women often play out resistance to [masculine] authority in sexual terms: as the appropriated objects of men, we seek to disturb the system of patriarchal control through acts of sexual defiance'[9]

By portraying Sally and Clarissa sharing a kiss Woolf breaks down the traditional heterosexual love triangle between Clarissa, Peter and Richard: in this moment female sexuality and desire is introduced although it is not long before the masculine, in the form of Peter, interrupts. Clarissa views this interruption as 'running one's face against a granite wall

[4] Virginia, Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage Classics 2004), p.1.

[5] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.29.
[6] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.29.
[7] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.35.
[8] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.32.
[9] Suzan, Harrison 'Playing with fire: Women's sexuality and artistry in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples', *Mississippi Quarterly.*

in the darkness'.[10] The interruption can be seen as a reassertion of male dominance; Clarissa's horror is not 'lesbian panic – a reaction that occurs when a character […] is unwilling to confront or reveal her lesbianism or lesbian desire'[11] but is a reaction to Peter's 'hostility; his jealousy [and] determination to break into their companionship'.[12] This reassertion of heterosexual masculinity puts the story back on to the traditional socially acceptable romance plot between a man and a woman, and Harrison believes that it brings with it a 'loss of creativity and potential'.[13] When Sally and Clarissa meet again at Clarissa's party Sally has lost her creativity and sexual energy; it is made clear this is due to her marriage to a 'bald man with a large buttonhole'.[14] Smith argues that the courtship of Sally and Clarissa is an attraction that is a danger to the 'successful fulfilment of this type of plot-marriage'.[15] Sally's creativity and sexual energy are sacrificed so not to get in the way of the 'heroine and the economic security and social responsibility of the marriage bed'[16] but their attraction proves to be too strong despite the reassertion of the male dominance as Clarissa never denies her erotic attraction to Sally or other women, stating their connection as something that 'can only exist between women'.[17] The novel ends with Clarissa still, at 52, questioning her choice in marrying Richard Dalloway. In doing this Woolf follows the traditional romance storyline but keeps homosexuality and female desire in the subtext.

Septimus returns from the war suffering from shell shock, haunted by hallucinations and suicidal thoughts. Amongst these traumas he is greatly affected by the image of his commanding officer and friend Evans. Evans is described as being 'undemonstrative in the company of women';[18] this could mean that he too is homosexual, though it can be interpreted in other ways. The narrator describes them as 'two dogs playing on a hearth-rug […] they had to be together'.[19] It is never actually stated that Septimus and Evans engaged in sexual activities, but his wife mentions that the thought of heterosexual sex was increasingly repulsive to him and he abstained from sleeping with her. When Septimus witnesses the death of Evans he 'congratulated himself upon feeling very little';[20] his lack of emotion can be seen as further effort to repress his relationship with Evans, as despite his belief of being unaffected it is shown throughout the novel that he is in fact deeply traumatized by his friend's death, often seeing visions of him and screaming out his name.

Another character with an ambiguous sexuality is Miss Kilman. Miss Kilman has an interesting relationship with Elizabeth Dalloway, believing her to be 'all that she lived for'.[21]

[10] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.30.
[11] Harrison 'Playing with fire'.
[12] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.30.
[13] Harrison 'Playing with fire'.
[14] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.277.
[15] Harrison 'Playing with fire'.
[16] Harrison 'Playing with fire'.
[17] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.30.
[18] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.76.
[19] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.75.
[20] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.76.
[21] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.114.

It appears that Miss Kilman is trying to hang on to Elizabeth and although it is not obvious that this is due to sexual reasons, the text offers clues. Miss Kilman describes Elizabeth as 'so beautiful'[22] more than once and sees her as someone she 'genuinely loved'.[23] The way Miss Kilman views Elizabeth is obsessive, and possessive: she wishes to 'clasp her […] make her hers absolutely and forever […] that was all she wanted'.[24] Again this behaviour can be interpreted as Miss Kilman's strong sexual desire for Elizabeth or merely a scheme to take what is Clarissa's as the women strongly dislike each other.

Virginia Woolf grew up when homosexuality was legally considered a perversion and was linked to mental illness and so was 'compelled to live in a relatively secret […] sexual existence'.[25] This is reflected in the portrayal of Clarissa Dalloway, whose true love seems to be Sally Seaton, though ends up in a heterosexual marriage to Richard Dalloway, a man who she shares little connection with. In keeping her characters' true feelings opaque Woolf shows the turmoil it enacts upon their health: from suicide to a complete loss of self it is evident that sexual repression has a great impact upon identity.

[22] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.116.
[23] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.116.
[24] Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway,* p.116.
[25] James, Schiff, 'Rewriting Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway: Homage, Sexual Identity, and the Single-Day Novel by Cunningham, Lippincott, and Lanchester', *Critique, Summer.*

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