

# Mrs. Dalloway: A Path Towards Virginia Woolf's Unconscious

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**Abstract:** The author is interested by the latent content of the novel, the fantasies and unconscious desires conveyed by the work. Mrs Dalloway is a good example. Virginia Woolf stages characters to whom she gives life, body and soul. She has an extraordinary ability to put herself in the place of each of her characters and gives us their most secret and intimate thoughts and moods. Mrs Dalloway's novel tells us about the day of a middle class woman who is going to give a party in the evening at her home. We understand that she is married but it is an unsatisfactory marriage. She remembers a lover from her youth, Peter Walsh, and he shows up at her home. Her unconscious desire is to renew with this ancient love she refused. The Lucrezia-Septimus couple is also an unsatisfactory marriage. He develops delirious symptoms. Virginia Woolf is projecting her own mental illness on Septimus with a remarkable description. Her first crisis appeared at the death of her mother, then at the death of her father and her marriage with Leonardo was followed by three crises. Her manic-depressive illness is linked to a lack of her mother, a beautiful woman who took more time to take care of poor and sick people and to the incest "half-brother and sister". The work seems to be built like a dream with defense mechanisms to hide the unconscious desires of the novelist: the nostalgia of a youth love and unconscious death wishes for her husband.

**Keywords:** Manic-depressive State, Incest, Unconscious Fantasies, Literature Creation

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## I. Introduction

What interests me is the latent content of the work, the fantasies and unconscious desires conveyed by the work. [8] I follow the path of Freud, [3] Green [4] and Anzieu. [1].

Mrs Dalloway [12] is a good example. Virginia Woolf describes places where she lived when a child and an adolescent and she stages characters to whom she gives life, body and soul. She has an extraordinary ability to put herself in the place of each of her characters, and gives us their most secret and intimate thoughts and moods. The characters are seen from the inside, and also from the outside by many other persons.

The flow of ideas' association is reminiscent of the flow of the words observed in bipolar patients, who maintain a certain exaltation outside their crises.

The writer depicts all the strata of the society, from the most modest to the most affluent, with a lot of humor, sometimes biting irony and gives us a vision of a mental illness with delusion through the character of Septimus.

Virginia Woolf married in 1912 at age thirty with Leonardo Woolf, a deceiving marriage (from my point of view), followed by three psychotic decompensations. Her husband was the editor of her works and read all her manuscripts. She masks elements of her biography consciously or unconsciously. This is the work of creation, similar to the one of dream. The novel looks like a daydream.

This novel was quite innovative for its time. Published in 1925, the subject is the day of a woman of the British high society. Her husband is a member of the Parliament, and she gives a reception at her home in the evening. It is very likely that Virginia Woolf was inspired by Ulysses of James Joyce. She read a draft of it in 1918 but her husband and herself refused to publish it in the Hogarth Press.

Her novel would have been conceived on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1920, the day after a dinner with T. S Eliot who spoke to them about Joyce. In her diary she notes the development of Ulysses over a day of sixteen episodes. Virginia Woolf situates the novel after the 14-18 war and the Spanish flu, therefore shortly after the time she conceived the

novel. [2].

The story of this day is punctuated by the bells of Big Ben giving a rhythm. They are the symbol of the time flowing away. *The Hours* was the first title chosen by Virginia Woolf. It is a text without chapters, without titles of chapter, nearly without breathing with long paragraphs in the manner of Proust for whom she had a deep admiration.

The novel is both descriptive and introspective. Nature is evoked with great sensibility and poetry.

## 2. Method: Mrs. Dalloway's Novel

It is a succession of "impressionist" paintings, which unfold one after the other. The characters are painted with great finesse and sometimes with caustic irony. They follow one another, come back as a leitmotiv, like an ebb and flow, and find themselves at the evening's reception.

Several main themes can be identified in the novel.

### 2.1. The Walk in Kensington

Mrs. Dalloway lives in Kensington. She has gone on foot to buy flowers for the reception she is giving that evening.

Virginia Woolf lived her childhood and adolescence at 22 Hyde Park gate in Kensington. When her father died, the house in Kensington was then sold to buy another in Bloomsbury. Evoking this area can be seen as nostalgia for a past before the many bereavements she went through: her mother at thirteen, Stella, her oldest half-sister at fifteen, her father at twenty-two and her brother Thoby at twenty-four.

A neighbor describes the main character, Clarissa Dalloway: a charming person, a bit of a bird in her, over fifty, very white since her illness. We don't know what disease but it is suggested several times without knowing which one it is. "*Thin as a stile with a ridiculous little face and a bird's beak nose*". Just look at some pictures of Virginia to find there her portrait. She gave herself the nickname of "sparrow", derived from sparrow. The novelist hides her real age of forty: Clarissa is about ten years older.

In her diary, she recounts the walks she took with her father, Stella, her sister Vanessa and also with her brothers Thoby and Adrian through Kensington, Hyde Park and Regent's Park. They went to Westminster Abbey and heard Big Ben bells ringing. This is the material from which the novelist draws. She observed nature, and what she saw around her with the eyes of a young girl and of a budding writer.

### 2.2. Reminiscence of a Youthful Love

Clarissa thinks of Peter Walsh, a lover from her youth. "*If he were here with me*". She wants to prove to herself that she was right not to marry him. She remembers the break-up by the fountain. He married a woman he met on the boat to India. "*Oh! If I could start my life over again*" delivers Clarissa-Virginia's most secret thoughts and unconscious desires.

According to her biographer Viviane Forrester, two men proposed marriage to her before she married Leonardo Woolf,

Hilton Young and a married man Sidney Waterlow. A third man, Walter Lamb could not make up his mind. For Regis Douget, the Hellenist Walter Headlam in his seventies, a friend of the Stephen family proposed to her in 1907 and died a year later. Lytton Strachey, a Thoby's friend, was reportedly proposed to, she accepted but he (or she) did not follow through. He was homosexual and will advise Leonardo Woolf to marry her. Some see in the character of Peter Walsh the portrait of her brother Thoby.

### 2.3. The Lucrezia-Septimus Couple

Septimus, thirty years old, is delirious with visual and auditory hallucinations. He wants to kill himself. Married to Lucrezia for four or five years, they are a couple who do not get along. His wife suffers, feels lonely and can no more confide in her husband.

Septimus stares and talks to himself. The car stood there "*It is a tree*". He thinks: "*I block the way... they are looking at me, pointing at me*". He had said: "*I will kill myself*". Septimus presents visual hallucinations, a delusion of persecution, and suicidal ideas. We can also spot a syndrome of influence. Septimus is looking at the plane: "*Look,... they are giving me signals*" "*The elms gave a sign to him; the leaves were alive, the trees were alive.*"

His wife Rezia "*would have liked it better if he was dead*" reveals the death wishes towards her husband. This is followed by a beautiful description of a delirium with hallucinations and an influence syndrome in a hypomanic context.

"Septimus talked, chattered and laughed making up stories. Then suddenly he said: "*Now let's go kill ourselves*". He talked with her to know about whether they were going to kill themselves, explained to her that people were evil, and that he saw them making up lies when they passed in the street. He knew all their thoughts. He knew everything. He knew the secret of the world... Then he began to speak out loud answering invisible people chatting, laughing, crying, getting very excited... The voices were whispering above his head... Why do he have this gift of seeing through the body, of guessing the future... He fell back in his chair, exhausted but not dejected... he waited before transmitting, struggling, suffering, new messages to humanity."

Virginia Woolf experienced such hypomanic and delirious symptoms during her manic-depressive crises. Her husband and she uttered such suicidal words.

### 2.4. Clarissa's Room

Back home, Clarissa describes her room.

"Also the room was a cell, the bed a narrow layer... she could not strip herself from a virginity preserved through childbirth... probably because of this frigidity she disappointed him" "She knew what she was missing ... it was something that rose and bubbled, that heated the cold contact of man and woman, or women with each other. She felt, it was certain, just what men felt... a rapture that grows and cracks the thin envelope and gushes and overflows... -- a

lighted spot in a flower – a hidden meaning almost expressed. And then what was close, receded and what was hard softened, it was over.”

These strange words suggest that Clarissa and her husband Richard sleep in separate rooms and no longer have sex. The only manifestation of their sexuality is their daughter Elizabeth. She thinks she is disappointing her husband with her frigidity but also suggests male impotence, female pleasure and homosexual love. She talks about male and female sexuality by ellipsis and metaphor but dares to do so when it was taboo. This is the only moment in her novel when she manifests sensuality with the impression that it escapes like an overflow of excitements.

I will discuss below Virginia's unsatisfactory marriage to Leonardo. The homosexual love of the novelist with Vita Sackville-West is well-known. She met her in 1922, ten years after her marriage. Did she want to discover pleasure with a woman, the pleasure she couldn't have with her husband?

### 2.5. Reunion with a Former Lover

Peter Walsh shows up at Clarissa's home after five years in India. *“What a joy to see you again”* and *“Why did I decide not to marry him”* sign Clarissa's regrets. Peter finds her insensitive and cold, but charming, so slim, so graceful. Clarissa remembers that he made her feel that she was frivolous, brainless, foolish and talkative. Peter tells her about his successes, his career at Oxford, his marriage, but he loves another woman, younger, married, two children. So Peter is not a free man. He breaks down crying and Clarissa consoles him. When he leaves, Clarissa invites him to her party.

Virginia Woolf refers to Rousseau: Peter's thoughts are those of a solitary walker... He remembers the summer when he was in love with Clarissa and the arrival of Richard Dalloway, whom he immediately experienced as a rival. Jealous, he made scenes, and since that break up by the fountain they have not seen each other again.

### 2.6. Lucrezia's Suffering

Virginia Woolf then talks about Rezia's suffering. She can no longer bear to live with her mean and cruel husband. Septimus is getting stranger and stranger. Standing by the river, he said to her: *“Now we will kill ourselves”*.

According to Viviane Forrester [3], Leonardo is fragile, neurasthenic with suicidal tendencies. Virginia condenses her madness and that of Leonardo into the character of Septimus. Septimus wants to throw himself out of the window like Virginia, but he will kill himself and succeed in his suicide attempt. Lucrezia's death desires are realized in the novel. They reveal the unconscious death desires of the novelist for her husband.

The novelist projects herself into the main character Mrs Dalloway, the healthy part of herself. Septimus represents the sick part. Clarissa says: *“In a way, she felt very much like him—like that young man who had killed himself”*. They are projections of her Ego's splitting. She also finds herself in

Rezia's suffering.

### 2.7. The Portrait of Richard Dalloway by His Friend Hugh

He is a good fellow, a bit narrow-minded and heavy-handed, an excellent man. He is positive, reasonable, dull without a glimmer of imagination, extraordinarily meticulous. Virginia is trying to mislead us because this is not at all the portrait of her husband.

### 2.8. The Reception

Clarissa has invited British high society, aristocrats, a prime minister. Virginia Woolf in real life speaks out against appearances. Every Thursday, she gathers writers, poets, philosophers and painters at her home and their conversations are certainly very different from those of the aristocracy. Is it a way of ironizing with sarcastic humor on this type of social gatherings where her parents went and that she also attended?

The guests leave. The evening has been a success and the novel ends with a sentence from Peter: *“What is this fear? This rapture? What is this extraordinary emotion that stirs me? Is it Clarissa? She was there.”* Peter is still in love with Clarissa. It is the novelist's unconscious desire.

This is the story of an unsatisfactory marriage. Clarissa finds compensations in the social link, social gatherings where she excels. She notes the failure of her marital life and wonders if she was wrong to end her love affair with Peter Walsh.

## 3. Result

Virginia's fragility appeared in her adolescence, and her inability to mourn the many deaths that struck the family will lead to crises of depression or delusional mania, throughout her life. She decompensates on a psychotic mode, and may be also her dear brother Thoby who had two attacks: when he wanted to throw himself out of the window of his boarding school, and also at Hyde Park Gate. [2, 5].

#### *First crisis at the death of her mother*

The death of her mother, at the age of thirteen, was followed by a first depressive episode in 1895. *“An abyss opened that day under my feet”* she would later say. Strange are the lack of affect in front of the remains of her mother and a hallucination (the impression to see a man sitting by the bed). In his biography, her nephew Quentin Bell writes: *“The first breakdown, I don't know how to call it, happened just after her mother's death... She knew then that she was mad and that she might be mad again”*.

Then there is the death of her older half-sister Stella two years later, about whom Virginia is very ambivalent. Stella takes her mother's place, taking care of the house and of her father, which leads to a reaction of jealousy (unconscious) in Virginia who considers the relationship between her father and Stella as incestuous and speaks of incest.

#### *Second crisis at the death of her father*

The second crisis occurred in May 1904. Virginia is twenty-two years old. Her father, Leslie Stephen, has just

died of stomach cancer. Virginia took care of him with devotion. During a trip to Italy, she becomes tired and irritable, complains of headaches, and becomes overexcited. She distrusts her sister Vanessa, misses her father excessively, thinks the nurses are monsters, hears voices, and refuses to eat. She tries to commit suicide by throwing herself out of the window. She hears birds singing in Greek and King Edouard VII talking profanity. An older family friend, Violet Dickinson, takes her at her home, and helps her publish her first article in the Guardian.

We have here again a wonderful description of a delirious mania crisis: overexcitation, fatigability, headaches, insomnia, irritability, anorexia with delusional themes of persecution and auditory hallucinations. The crisis lasts for seven months which is longer than the usual duration of four, five months before neuroleptics.

Life in the dark and austere house in Kensington is sad and routine. After her father's death, the house in Hyde Park Gate is sold to buy another one, bright, in the bohemian district of Bloomsbury. What could be an object loss is instead a liberation. Georges got married in September 1904. The Stephen sisters freed from the grip of their father and half-brother were able to construct their own identity in reaction to their bourgeois and Victorian conformism. They will paint the walls, replace tea with coffee, and remove the evening dress. The Bloomsbury group will meet on Thursday evening with Thoby's Cambridge friends. Bourgeois society considers their free life scandalous, very contemporary for us...

#### *Death of Thoby and marriage of Vanessa*

In 1906, after returning from a trip to Greece, Thoby, the beloved and admired brother, died of typhoid fever. A year before, Virginia became a literary critic and was considering teaching. This saved her from a relapse. Just after Thoby's death, her sister Vanessa married Clive Bell and Virginia who had always been very close to her sister, not to say fusional, felt excluded, another loss of object. She envies her rival. Virginia will play an unhealthy role by trying to seduce Clive. She was probably in love with him. He becomes her first reader and encourages her in her writing. After the birth of her nephew Julian, Virginia writes: *"To be single at twenty-nine, to be a failure, childless, demented and not even a writer."*

A new crisis occurs in 1910, which lasts six months. Was it after learning that Clive had a mistress? During a stay in a nursing home, she oscillates from despair to euphoric excitement.

#### *Marriage to Leonardo followed by three crises*

Three new crises will occur between 1913 and 1915 after her marriage to Leonardo Woolf. Sometimes she recriminates against Leonardo, sometimes she feels guilty towards him and we find there Freud's text *Mourning and Melancholy* with the impossible mourning of the love object, the generally unconscious accusations against the object, the guilt and the turning over on oneself during the suicidal act. The novelist has shifted her mental illness onto the male character of Septimus.

Leonardo was a friend of Thoby at Cambridge. Having finished his final exam in the last, he leaves as a civil servant in Ceylon. He complains to Lytton Strachey about his life and the latter advises him to marry Virginia, thirty years old, single, a good match, intelligent and cultured, who starts as a literary critic. Leonardo, passionate about literature, writes. Fatherless at twelve, he is himself depressive and suicidal. His marriage to Virginia allows him to return to England without financial worries. He will exert his influence on fragile Virginia. In his diary, he says that Virginia is frigid, and he is a devoted husband who protects her from mental crisis and encourages her writing career. It is true that they have intellectual exchanges, share the same passion for literature and will create together a printing house, the Hogarth Press. It will allow Virginia to publish her books, but in their intimate life Leonardo forbids sexual life and motherhood under the pretext of avoiding new crises. Rezia says: *"It was not possible for her to grow old and not have children"*. Leonardo has found an easy prey to manipulate and Virginia falls back under the influence of a husband who decides for her what is good for her and what she has to do.

Viviane Forrester's biography [3] reveals a different story. On their honeymoon, Virginia was too much excited during sexual intercourse and Leonardo was impotent. Before the marriage, he had sexual relations with prostitutes. He forbids his wife the sexuality and motherhood desired by Virginia without taking into account the favorable advice of her doctors. This is another mourning for Virginia. She will find compensation in writing and the recognition of her talent, and in the weekly evenings with writers and artists. Leonardo is a narcissistic object choice that values her literary creation but prohibits her from being a lover and a mother. Since childhood Virginia wants to be a writer like her father, a paternal identification. The father paid for his sons' education but not for his daughters. Virginia is self-taught and her father allowed her free access to his library. She envies the freedom of her brothers. Envy of the penis, phallic claim and paternal identification are going in the same direction of a reversed Oedipus at the time of the death of her mother and of the first pathological depression.

Virginia cannot mourn her mother, then her father and then an unsatisfactory marriage. It is a pathological melancholic mourning. But this impossibility to mourn goes back to early childhood, the impossibility to separate and introject an ambivalent maternal object to overcome the depressive phase of Melanie Klein. She was a shy child who took refuge in reading and developed a very close relationship with her sister Vanessa.

Racamier says to us: *"One knows how much it is difficult to mourn a loved object which was by too much hated. Mourning can become melancholy in order to be at least preserved. The loved object by too much hated is introjected and then attacked by inside."*

The child must mourn the loss of the primary object, accept the loss of an all-powerful mother, renounce a narcissistic union in order to discover a true object relationship.

### *Virginia's mother*

Julia Stephen is a very beautiful woman who was a model for her aunt, a photographer, and several pre-Raphael painters. Born in a well-to-do Indo-English family, she married, at the age of twenty-one, to a lawyer Herbert Duckworth, who died from an internal abscess at age twenty-four. She remained a widow with two children of two and three years old, expecting a baby. Devastated by her husband's death, she devoted herself to caring for the sick and dying poor. She meets Leslie Stephen, a writer and an editor. She admires him and will accept to marry him three years later after the loss of his wife. They will have four children together: Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia and Adrian.

Julia is a bereaved mother who abandons her first three children for poor sick people. She is described by Leslie as melancholy: *"There was even a cloud over her maternal affections... it seemed to me that she had accepted grief as a life partner ... that she was a person who relived drowning and sometimes felt like she was sinking"*.

After her second marriage, she goes on with her nursing care and the children were left to servants. Their father is absorbed writing his books and could not bear to be disturbed. The Stephen are going out at night and receives many guests, writers and artists in London and during the summertime in a house they rent in Cornwall. Julia is not motherly and denigrates her second husband who does not replace the first one. All this sheds light on the incestuous climate of this blended family and the outbreak of Virginia's bipolar illness.

The description of Mrs. Ramsay in *Walk to the Lighthouse* [11] is a portrait of Virginia's mother that does not lack humor. She shows a beautiful, dignified woman, caressing the hair of the youngest child clinging to her skirts. She reads to him or knits while the other children live their lives in the middle of this large blended family open to many guests. Lilye Briscoe's character expresses the feeling of abandonment and the desire of a tender relationship with Mrs. Ramsay. The unconscious of the novelist denounces here what she may have experienced with her mother. In a letter to Virginia, Vanessa writes: *"You have painted a picture of Mama which for me resembles more than anything I could have conceived possible. It is almost painful to see her brought back to life."*

We understand that Virginia's mother is a narcissistic, cold and distant woman, not very warm with her children, who spend a lot of time in her nursing and social evenings with her husband. She reads stories to her children. Virginia's investment in reading represents a link to her mother and father, a writer who opens his library to her.

## 4. Discussion

The death of Julia Stephen has brought the whole blended family of seven children (eight with Leslie's disabled daughter) into mourning. The father lets himself go, clings to Stella, the eldest daughter of Herbert Duckworth. She is twenty-nine years old, very beautiful. She looks like her mother but softer and more maternal. She takes her mother's

place, taking care of her stepfather, of the children and of the house. The father's behavior was considered incestuous by Virginia. Is it a fantasy or a reality?

The incest half-brother-sister really happened. Virginia will reveal it much later during a conference at the Memoir Club, confirmed by Quentin Bell's biography. He is Vanessa's son. George Duckworth has been the lover of Vanessa and Virginia.

The eldest son of thirty years old takes the place of the fallen stepfather, identifies with the incestuous stepfather who pursues Stella with his assiduities. He becomes the head of the family, takes his half-sisters of sixteen and nineteen years old out to balls. He offers them dresses and jewels, and back home, he slips into their bed. Vanessa and Virginia are old enough to refuse, but they do not. They are under the influence of a stepbrother they despise.

The act has taken the place of fantasy. [10] Can we speak of rape or perverse seduction? The two sisters undergo the hold of their half-brother but accept it. For Hélène Parat [9], fraternal incests are *"the witnesses of a narcissistic problem of undifferentiation which filters the family relation"*.

The eldest brother of thirty years old cancels the difference of generation and does not recognize the taboo of incest. When an adolescent of seventeen years old, Gerald sexually touched Virginia when she was five years old. A photography from 1896 shows Gerald on his knees holding Virginia's hands like two lovers... On a photography from the year before, Georges is standing next to Virginia with a smug and conquering look.

After her mother's death, Stella gets engaged and married. Her stepfather tries to dissuade her and testifies in a letter to the young bride of his excessive attachment. She leaves on her honeymoon, finds herself pregnant, and dies on her return of appendicitis. Strange destiny for a young bride, future young mother! [One has the impression that the death instinct, severe psychosomatic disorganization [6, 7] psychic decompensation take precedence over the life instinct in this family.]

## 5. Conclusion

The work seems to be built like a dream,[8] with defense mechanisms to hide the unconscious desires of the novelist: the nostalgia of a youth love, the unconscious death wishes for her husband, the regret of an unsatisfactory marriage through Clarissa and Richard Dalloway and Lucrezia and Septimus. Compensations are found in social life.

We listen, we understand that she is talking about her marriage with Leonardo Woolf. The unconscious desire is to renew with a youth love she refused.

The scenario is that of the day of a woman's life, the story of a middleclass woman's day. She will receive members of English aristocracy and a prime minister at her home in the evening.

Virginia Woolf shifts her problems onto her fictional characters. The absence of sexual life in Richard and Clarissa's couple is what she experiences with her husband.

The impotence, suggested by a metaphor, evokes that of Leonardo, who does not seem to be sexually inclined, will not have any mistress, and will be satisfied with an absence of sexual relations with his wife.

The hatred of the husband and the death wishes of Lucrezia reveals Virginia's unconscious desires that she cannot feel. The homosexual love discreetly evoked is the one that she lived with Vita Sackville-West. The mental illness of Septimus, who is delirious and invaded by visual and auditory hallucinations, repeat the symptoms experienced by the author. The Septimus-Lucrezia's couple condenses her psychiatric illness and the unconscious hate for her husband.

One can think of a split in Virginia's personality: the healthy part in Clarissa and the sick part in Septimus, the feminine and masculine part of her bisexuality. Septimus' suicidal ideas are those of Leonardo and hers.

Shifting, condensation, projection, splitting are at work in the creative process. Symbolization can be found throughout the novel: Big Ben is the time flowing away, the Queen and the King or the Prime Minister are symbols of the powerful parents. The plane suggests freedom, an escape from reality. The motives of the waves and the sea give a rhythm of backwash, the nostalgia of the lost paradise of the mother's womb, and the sway of the fetus in the uterus.

The letter left for her husband before drowning in the River Ouse is indeed that of a melancholy person who takes the blame on herself in order not to accuse Leonardo. They never left each other. They could not have done so because of their respective separation anxieties. Her husband is a narcissistic object choice. He allowed her to be a writer but deprived her of sexuality and maternity. Maybe she would have been protected from numerous crises with a tender and loving husband, who played the role of a good mother,

perhaps like Peter Walsh.

Because of her manic depressive illness, Virginia Woolf is close to her unconscious, and it is easier to discover her unconscious fantasies and desires. She is one of the most innovative writer at that time.

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