

‘Shell-sprinkled beach’: Life; Death; and Water in ‘Mrs Dalloway’

Shrestha Chatterjee

shresthachatterjee presi@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Literary Studies, Brainware University

Abstract

Focusing on the vivid image of water in Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs Dalloway, I argue that Woolf establishes a modernist aquatic mythology and uses it to explore central concerns of identity and self hood. Water that simpers underneath her texts acts as a vessel for life, comingling effectively both life and death. Through a reading that is centred largely on a eco-critical understanding, I posit that it is in the use of such imagery that Woolf’s high modernist vision is realized.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Modernism, Imagery, Virginia Woolf

Images of seascapes, flowing streams, rivers and diving permeate Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*. Danica Igrutinovic has explored Modernism’s shift towards ‘the disturbing but fundamental ‘others’—the materialistic, the animalistic, the primitive, and the unconscious’ (55). In Igrutinovic’s opinion, this gave impetus to the establishment of a ‘distinctive mythology of water’ that influenced contemporary writers (55). Virginia Woolf’s personal writings show a consistent use of aqueous imageries. A riveting diary entry by her envisions ‘humanity’ as a ‘vast wave, undulating and free’ (‘The Diaries of Virginia Woolf volume 3’ 22). Woolf’s notion of the ‘poetry of existence’ itself is, she acknowledges, ‘connected with the sea and St. Ives’ (‘The Diaries of Virginia Woolf volume 2’ 246). This paper attempts to analyze the recurrent metaphors and images of water and fluidity in *Mrs Dalloway* as a part of Woolf’s deliberate narrative strategy that aims at portraying her vision of the simultaneous existence of life and death in the Modern world.

Focusing particularly on Woolf’s informed handling and conscious use of these aquatic metaphors, this paper proposes to investigate the way in which such usage contributes to the development of Woolf’s artistic vision. In doing so, it hopes to facilitate an enhanced understanding of the text.

Although commendable work has been done on various aspects of Woolf’s texts, a sustained emphasis on the aquatic metaphors and imagery has been lacking, especially of *Mrs Dalloway*, where their subtle use often goes unnoticed. Using the already forged critical connections and ideas, this paper attempts to develop them further.

Life in *Mrs Dalloway* appears as a symphony of voices, impressions, and experiences. The narrative, though structured around the events of a single day, encompasses a whole spectrum of experience — life and death; chaos and order; mourning and celebrating; dismantling and gathering. Woolf deftly uses aquatic metaphors that depict this seemingly paradoxical reality of a life — in the notion of which death is ever present. Like Woolf, characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* often think in terms of Peter Walsh’s ‘nautical metaphors’ (64). Thoughts ‘bubble away’ (118) like the ‘contended drip’ of ‘taps that have been left running’ (25). In Peter’s imaginings, Clarissa Dalloway regards humanity as ‘a doomed race chained to a sinking ship’ (64). Though Peter interjects, Tyndell and Huxley’s books had nurtured this fondness for ‘nautical metaphors’ (64).

Several tenets of this instance are worth considering in detail. A dynamic reflection, verging on self-reflexivity, Peter's interjection might be an attempt to signal the readers' awareness of the conscious exercise of such metaphors. The analogy, though ominous, is hardly original. This traditional metaphor of life as an oceanic journey is something Patrizia Muscogiuri calls 'a classical locus of antiquity' (102). What Muscogiuri sees as remarkably unique is Woolf's reworking and subversion of these existing tropes. It displays, she asserts, 'a shrewd understanding of the politics that inform the western inscriptions of the sea' (102). It also echoes Elizabeth Dalloway's vision of the bus as first a pirate and then a 'pirate ship' ruthlessly traversing the sea of life (111).

Seen in the light of Muscogiuri's statement, the sinking ship might hint at her familiarity with the traditional images that she tries to transform. There is a sense of impending doom; the 'chain' and 'sinking ship' accentuates the feeling, suggesting that there is no possibility of escape. This passive acceptance that one might even term as an anticipation of destruction is characteristic of the Modern condition. For the Modern mind that had been a witness to the ravages of the First World War, life at every moment entails an encounter with death. In spite all his sneering, Peter too is fond of these metaphors. While ruminating on the sounds of an ambulance passing through Tottenham Court Road as a result of Septimus's death (though he is ignorant of it); Peter ponders on life's beauty. He salvages it from its 'turns and corners' and confronts the exhaustion that has resulted from his meeting with Clarissa.

Peter's thoughts are replete with images of water. The myriad impressions and sensations of the day are projected as drops of water that 'drip.drip.drip' into a dark and inviolable cellar, never to see the light of day (124). Images of the cellar and dripping water might be influenced by Sigmund Freud's conception of the 'unconscious mind' ('Interpretation of Dreams' 45). Woolf was familiar with Freud's postulations and it 'profoundly impacted her artistic practice' (Robbins 134). Freud theorised the 'unconscious mind' as a repository of repressed desires and anxieties ('Interpretation of Dreams' 94). If the textual instance is examined through the lenses of Freudian psychoanalysis, it might be possible to suggest that there is a connection between the impressions that trickle down into the dark cellar of Peter's mind and the illegitimate desires that the 'ego' suppresses. Taking into account the often 'psycho-sexual' nature of Freudian desires ('Interpretation of Dreams' 95), and the spectral presence of death through the ambulance's sounds, the image assumes a different significance.

This balancing of life (through the enactment of thought processes and desires) with death (the ambulance's sound) depicts the coexistence of 'Eros' (life instincts) and 'Thanatos' (death drive) that Freud postulated in his theories. Human existence in Freud's imagination was contingent on the mind's constant struggle between these contradictory drives ('The Ego and the Id' 25). In this moment of realisation, of clarity, 'a moment in which things came together; this ambulance; life and death' (124) Peter feels like a 'white shell-sprinkled beach left bare' (125). This identification with a beach that has been divested of life and colour and left with past's remnants is particularly significant. The novel and its characters are haunted by the passing of time, and with it, the passing away of their lives. The beach then might represent a life which had once flourished but at the present moment bears only the vestigial barren 'shells' as its reminders.

Julia Briggs insists that these 'images of emptiness' recur across Woolf's novels (141). To her these are 'mementos of human brevity, of the ephemeral nature of our lives.'(141). The shell-strewn beach is then a 'container that silently and unconsciously mourns the life it once held, it nurses an imprint of a former life; for objects are imprinted with human life and it is this that gives them their particular significance for Woolf'(143). Briggs' conceptualisation of the multiple meanings behind the images

of shells in 'To the Lighthouse' can be applied here. In 'To the Lighthouse' 'the figure of the shell combines life and plenitude – the fruitfulness of Mrs Ramsay as the eternal mother, pink-lined, birth-giving – with fragility and, ultimately, emptiness' (Briggs 145). This collocation of death and life is constant across Woolf's novels.

Additionally, Briggs connects the shells that have been emptied of the life it once held with an empty skull (another image that is common in Woolf's works, most notably in the opening pages of 'Jacob's Room' where young Jacob holds a sheep's skull while playing on the beach) and considers them to be '*memento mori* placed among the blowing sandhills of time' (145).

In the receding shadows of the 'Great War', it is not impossible for Peter's mind to associate the sea shells with the 'shells' of a bullet. Such an association would imbibe the residue of both life and the violence that extinguishes it. Here, Briggs's conjectures on the wordplay involving 'shells' in the context of 'To the Lighthouse'(150) have been used since an undercurrent of war trauma runs through both novels. At a time when the bastion of British pride—the British Colonial Empire—was dismantling, Peter's violent realisation and identity crisis is perhaps emblematic of the nation at large. Peter has been consistently projected as the quintessential white coloniser, be it in his pride in the West's 'triumph of civilisation' (123) or in his extravagantly bold chase of the woman on the street (134). Life and death comes together in the image of the shell-strewn beach; the ambulance, and perhaps also in the diminishing flames of a nation's past glory.

Similarly they linguistically assimilate in Peter's mind. In his acceptance of life, he inevitably accepts death. The sudden frequency with which the realisation of death intrudes upon moments of happiness is visible in Rezia's fond recollection of the times she spent with Septimus. Their calm and happiness is shattered when he talked, chattered, laughed, 'and said 'now we will kill ourselves,' when they were standing by the river' (54). Water stands witness to the beginning and end of relationships in this novel. Clarissa and Richard's love blossoms when they go boating on Lake Bruton (51), while the broken fountain stands as a symbol of their shattered relationship.

Paul Shehaan argues that for the modernist consciousness, every moment is an epic (18). The narrative can be seen as a Jungian 'Nekyia — a symbolic journey of the hero through water' (qtd.in Igrutinovic 55). Using Garvey's thesis of Woolf's reshaping of the landscape into a city submerged underwater (61) one can illustrate the construction of this myth in 'Mrs Dalloway'. If London is indeed presented as part of a marine topography of which Clarissa and Septimus are, to borrow Shehaan's terms 'modernist heroes'(21), it is proper to assume that the narrative mythologizes their struggle to cope with life. Igrutinovic (although she deals with water in 'Ulysses') (incorrect spelling) suggests that the 'Nekyian journey begins with the hero's exile from the rational, stable world and descends into the irrational chaotic watery depths.'(56). Here, the hero battles with beasts and 'suffers a symbolic death' only to be reborn. The 'victorious hero is then allowed to take the (spoils guarded by the beasts) to the surface' (56). Garvey identifies three figures in the narrative — 'a diver, a martyr sailor, and a buccaneer' (68).

Clarissa dives, rather plunges, into the depths of life, the buccaneer Peter can only imagine her 'silver-green in a mermaid's dress lolloping on the waves' (142). This mythic connection to the deadly sirens that lure sailors to their deaths shouldn't go unnoticed. Here again, the sensuous and the deadly are merged. The image also raises a pertinent question; can 'mermaid' Clarissa be the cause of 'sailor' Septimus's drowning? It might as well be so, created as each other's 'double', the death of one among them was inevitable. Septimus anticipated this when he imagined himself as 'a drowned sailor on a rock. Who leant over the edge of the boat and fell down...went under the sea (56). The analogy in

addition to prophesying Septimus's death, also sustains the recurring metaphor of the boat of humanity in a sea of London's life. Clarissa's plunge into the June day thus initiates the mythic journey, consequently she and Septimus suffer; as Clarissa's 'double' Septimus sacrifices himself, and the valiant Clarissa returns from the depths with her treasure. Michael Ferber considers 'larks to be symbolic of a new dawn' (104), echoing in Clarissa's renewed acceptance of life the phrase 'What a lark! What a plunge' (1). One might question, what is the treasure? It is Clarissa's moment of 'epiphany', when she realises that in spite of the struggles and the pain, life itself is worth living. Clarissa gathers herself and returns to the party, bringing the narrative to an end.

Woolf hence uses existing conceptions of water and fluidity and re-shapes them to reflect her politics about the notion of life. Unlike her contemporaries (like Joseph Conrad in *The Shadow Line*), water no longer remains a 'still void' of 'indolent silence' (qtd.in Muscogiuri 105) but as Muscogiuri proposes, it 'becomes a means of life's sustenance' (104).

The paper has examined the way in which references to water constructs Woolf's vision of reality as a harmonious symphony of life and death. In each water-related reference, there are connotations to both life and death. Life, like the song of 'the ancient spring' that bubbles through the earth survives and is 'eternal' (66). Through this and the use of 'stream of consciousness,' the author erases binaries and paints her view of life as an amalgamation of living and of death; suffering and rejoicing — a life in which the presence of one doesn't negate the existence of the other.

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