

The Monster in the Forest: Soul-Speech in *Mrs. Dalloway*

"I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side--something like that."

Virginia Woolf on *Mrs. Dalloway*

The influences that shaped the formation of *Mrs. Dalloway* have been widely discussed, and the current of scholarship has flowed toward how the forces that impelled the Modernist movement captivated Virginia Woolf's ingenious mind. There is little doubt that fellow writers, namely Proust, Eliot, and Joyce, profoundly affected her approach to fiction, specifically her narrative style, and her own diaries bear this out. One writer goes so far as to suggest naively that "it is tempting to believe that the author had been reading Mr. Joyce and had decided that her technique needed bringing up to date" (Guiguet 241). Woolf had just finished reading *Ulysses* upon commencing *Mrs. Dalloway*, and, on the surface, the similarities are indeed striking; most notably similar is the idea of capturing the action within the scope of a single day and of course the employment of interior monologues. But Woolf's self-described "tunnelling process" in which she sought to "dig out beautiful caves behind my characters" is unique, and is crucial to both the telling and interpretation of *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is hardly a gimmick, and is certainly not Woolf's attempt to gain access to a trendy new boys' club. Her so-called stream of consciousness narration is, rather, the process by which she attempts to reveal the unconscious aspects of her characters' minds, the unadulterated truth behind what they feel. While the interior monologues do incorporate memory and reflection primarily, they occasionally drift into the aspects of wishful thinking, vision, fantasy, and dream. These revelatory sequences are often marked by

metaphoric language that seems to control the characters, suggesting an intensity that offers a more accurate picture of their understanding of their world and the society in which they live, and as such they should be considered independently. It is my contention that Woolf devised this unique type of narrative, which I will refer to as *soul-speech*, directly out of her personal experience with mental illness, and her knowledge of the relatively new science of psychoanalytic theory. The use of soul-speech forms a direct link to Woolf's purpose, to show the fine line between sanity and insanity in response to a human condition that is often terrifying when fully grasped.

Soul-speech, as discussed in this essay, is never expressed verbally, but always in the mind; it is only tangentially connected to reality and cannot be long sustained. It is marked by two or all three of these distinctly identifiable characteristics: (1) poetic language that is inconsistent with normal patterns of thinking and speaking, (2) random associations, or digression from reality as evidenced by factual information given in the novel, and (3) the presence of archetypes or mythological elements. Soul-speech is the language of madness, used by the sane and insane alike, the voice of the unconscious, reflecting a character's deepest desires. Prior to examining representative examples of soul-speech, it will be helpful to review briefly Woolf's exposure to Freud's theories at the time of writing, her understanding of her own mental illness, and a summary of the goals of her narrative technique.

Most critics discount Freudian theory in relation to Woolf's early novels because it is widely known that she did not "discover" Freud until the mid-1930's, and only visited him once, on 28 January 1939, near the end of his life (Briggs 347). Guiguet concedes that there are only two mentions of Freud in Woolf's diaries, both in 1939, but also cites an article that appeared in 1920 in which he claims that Woolf "asserts that it is not only legitimate but desirable for the

novelist to turn to Freudian theories to explain the behavior of his characters," but she also "points out the dangers inherent in too slavish or too exclusive an application of these theories" (Guiguet 35, note). This proves that, while it is not necessary to claim authorial intent when applying psychoanalytical theory to a text (by Woolf or anyone else), it is evident that Woolf did have more than a passing knowledge of and a significant interest in Freud's ideas before and during the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*, she composed between 1923 and 1925. Her understanding could have only increased thereafter, in the years just prior to publication; during the two-year period of composition, Hogarth Press (owned and operated by Leonard and Virginia Woolf) began to publish Freud's *Collected Papers* and *The Psycho-analytic Library* in English (Dowling 5). Further, in her recent biography, Julia Briggs points out that "Woolf was familiar with elements of Freudian thought from conversations with her brother Adrian and sister-in-law Karin, among the first practicing analysts in Britain, as well as with James and Alix Strachey, who from 1924 had been translating Freud's work for the Hogarth Press" (334). Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* had been available in English since 1913, and it is hard to imagine such a provocative topic *not* being discussed among the members of the Bloomsbury Group, of which Virginia Woolf was an integral part. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Freud's concept of the unconscious was fresh in Woolf's often troubled mind and contributed, at least in part, to her conception of *Mrs. Dalloway*, finding its way into the expressions of her fictional characters in the form of soul-speech.

On the subject of Woolf's mental illness, Briggs notes seven episodes (prior to the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*) she refers to as "trips" into Woolf's "inner darkness, in 1895, 1904, 1910, 1912, 1913, 1915 and, most recently, in the summer of 1921." She also posits, interestingly, that these seven bouts with depression may have inspired the name of the insane character, Septimus

(146). Speculation on the exact nature of Woolf's mental problems has included a variety of explanations, from cultural restrictions to abuse at the hands of ignorant physicians to manic depression; in fact, her distress was likely a combination of all three. Writing, especially during those periods of mania, proved to be as good a cure as any. Woolf believed that her illness, awful as it was, triggered a special insight. She writes in her essay, *On Being Ill*: "...how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed" (Briggs 46). This disclosure can be none other than the unconscious revealed, and yet these periods that yielded flashes of insight were temporary. Consider Leonard Woolf's description of his wife's symptoms:

She talked almost without stopping for two or three days, paying no attention to anyone in the room or anything said to her. For about a day what she said was coherent; the sentences meant something, though it was nearly all wildly insane. Then gradually it became completely incoherent, a mere jumble of disassociated words. (Jamison 30)

Leonard Woolf could just as easily be describing what I am calling soul-speech. Almost every major character in *Mrs. Dalloway* has at least one episode in which a physical experience triggers a memory or deeper thought, and then suddenly a highly poetic, occasionally incomprehensible speech seems to take over the narrative, as if the character has lost control over his or her senses for a moment. Then, another event from the physical world jolts the speaker back to reality and ordered thought. These ramblings are glimpses into the unconscious that Virginia Woolf knew well; they are carefully planted in the text, revealing more than is plainly apparent. She herself said of her anxious periods that they "...give one a plunge into deep waters; which is a little alarming, but full of interest.... There is an edge to it which I feel is of great importance.... One goes down into the well & nothing protects one from the assault of truth"

(Jamison 118). Curiously, Clarissa Dalloway's first interior monologue begins with the declaration, "What a plunge!" (*MD* 3)

Perhaps Woolf elicits something of a Freudian slip in her understanding of mental illness as going "down into the well," for she described her narrative technique in *Mrs. Dalloway* in strikingly similar language, suggesting a strong connection between the two. As previously noted, she called the method her "tunnelling process" and likened it to digging "beautiful caves behind my characters" (Guiguet 234). This is not to say that Woolf projected herself into any or all of her characters, for while DiBattista points out that Woolf "possesses not a single but a multiple personality...a more public and controlled form of the madness that periodically overwhelmed her," she is also correct when she says "we can never know the person who writes *directly* through her writing" (5-6). Thus, we can safely say that Woolf envisioned characters that are linked to a narrator who, at times, assists them to communicate in soul-speech the deeper anxieties of their lives, much in the way an author who suffered from manic depressive illness would herself be inclined to do. *Mrs. Dalloway* is therefore not merely a personal manifesto or political statement, though in some sense it contains these elements; it is, rather, a study of "the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side" (Guiguet 227)--an artistic creation of experimental form that probes the soul for truths that defy expression in common discourse. Brief episodes of madness--the rising of the unconscious--frighten the characters, even when they threaten to awaken. Clarissa Dalloway recognizes the repressed hatred for Mrs. Kilman that coils within her:

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*; ...at any moment this brute would be stirring, this hatred, which...made all

pleasure...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! (*MD* 12, emphasis added)

This image of the primeval forest is archetypal, emerging from Jung's concept of a collective unconscious, and Woolf uses it repeatedly. What follows is an attempt to lift the leaves that rest on the darkened floor of this dangerous wood, to uncover the souls of Woolf's major characters: Peter Walsh, Septimus Smith, and Clarissa Dalloway.

### Peter Walsh

Peter Walsh is mentioned by name 172 times in the novel, second only to Clarissa, who is named 293 times (Dowling 129). He is significant in understanding Clarissa because the two characters have shared experiences and memories, giving them a kind of "telepathic insight" into each other (Miller 64). Peter's character is well-suited for Freudian analysis, given his anxieties concerning women: he harbors deep, frustrated affection for Clarissa, is in love with a much younger woman, indulges in an extended fantasy about a pretty girl he follows from Trafalgar Square, and actually falls asleep and dreams about a nurse sitting beside him on a bench in Regent Park. In many of his encounters with women, be they real or imagined, he fiddles nervously with his pocket knife, an overt symbol of his sexual insecurities. Peter's heightened sensitivity to his emotional dependence on women may be the reason he "has never been allied with patriarchy" (Transue 74), and his transparency allows Woolf to interpret society at large while keeping Clarissa's public persona intact. Soul-speech therefore becomes a primary device for Peter's frequent revelations.

An early clue into the workings of Peter's psyche occurs in his first extended interior monologue. He is stepping into the street after an awkward meeting with Clarissa, who he had

not seen in five years while serving the Empire in India, "speaking to himself rhythmically, in time with the flow of the sound, the direct downright sound of Big Ben stroking the half-hour" (*MD* 48). He sees a reflection of himself as an "effigy" in the plate glass window in Victoria Street, and his narration falters as he peers "rather drearily into the glassy depths." In Lacanian terms, Peter's separation of himself into an object for beholding shows him as a fragmented figure; as he gazes at his reflection, he recognizes a lifeless effigy in the place of a man. Clarissa has rejected him, again, though in fact she has simply reminded him of her earlier rejection (in favor of Richard Dalloway and the grand public life he affords her). Like Gabriel Conroy in Joyce's "The Dead" and Eliot's Prufrock (two characters with whom Woolf was familiar) with their party-related anxieties, Peter needs the approval of women, namely Clarissa, to complete his identity. He agonizes over whether or not he should attend Clarissa's party, fearing the murder of that part of himself, now detached, yet again. As "the last great tremors" of Big Ben sound out, the tone of his rumination startlingly changes:

As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit upholds the human frame. Where there is nothing, Peter Walsh said to himself; feeling hollowed out, utterly empty within. Clarissa refused me, he thought. He stood there thinking, Clarissa refused me. (*MD* 49)

This is the monster in the forest, rustling in the leaves of Peter's memory. The reflected effigy threatens to consume the real self. Unlike Clarissa, who closes the door on the unconscious and stifles the monster, or, in Freudian terms, silences the id by the action of the superego, soul-speech rushes forth from Peter's troubled mind. The bells of St. Margaret's chime, and Peter, in a bizarre association bordering on temporary madness, associates the church bells with Clarissa

herself, "being the voice of the hostess" (*MD* 49). For a brief moment, he sees Clarissa falling down dead, along with the past and the glories of better days: "No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried, and marched up Whitehall, as if there rolled down to him, vigorous, unending, his future" (*MD* 50). He cannot have Clarissa, but an attractive girl nearby provides a suitable substitute. The id has surfaced, seeking fulfillment of the pleasure principle; Peter's libido is unchecked. He follows her, "stealthily fingering his pocket-knife," comparing her to Clarissa, imagining a conversation, becoming "a romantic buccaneer, careless of all these damned proprieties" (*MD* 53).

The reader is reminded here not only of Peter's emotional weaknesses, but also of his strengths. He cannot ever feel comfortable in the superficiality of London society, and this is at least one reason why he departs for India; the pain of Clarissa's choosing convention (Richard Dalloway) over adventure (Peter) still plagues him. Daisy, his young lover, satisfies his need for passion, but he yearns for deeper fulfillment. The irrational fantasy of a life with the unnamed girl fails to satisfy him, abruptly ending as she enters a building and disappears, his vision "smashed to atoms" (*MD* 54). Finding a bench in Regent's Park, he slumbers in the sunshine, and the monster again rises slowly from under the leaves. The nurse sitting beside him is transformed in his dream into "one of those spectral presences which rise in twilight in woods," and Peter becomes the "haunter of lanes, disturber of ferns, and devastator of great hemlock plants...." (*MD* 56-57). The dream is conveyed through soul-speech; suddenly:

...myriads of things merged in one thing; and this figure...had risen from the troubled sea (he is elderly, past fifty now) as a shape might be sucked up out of the waves to shower down from her magnificent hands compassion, comprehension, absolution. ...let me walk

straight on to this great figure, who will, with a toss of her head, mount me on her streamers and let me blow to nothingness to the rest. (*MD* 57-58)

Avrom Fleishman finds hints of Woolf's intent in her manuscript drafts of the dream narrative, in which he sees the figure as a "psychological projection of a feminine archetype" based on Woolf's description of her (omitted from the final manuscript) as a "great and benignant power" (Fleishman 118). In my view, Freud's idea of the castration complex is at work here, with the feminine figure of Peter's dream best understood as the maternal role Clarissa plays in his life. His constant neurotic obsession with his pocket knife reflects a sexual repression linked with his inability to possess her, and a part of him is still ruled by the pleasure principle, expressed in his relationship with the innocent Daisy, and in fantasies and dreams. Upon awakening, he cries, inexplicably, "The death of the soul" (*MD* 58). Moments later, he interprets the dream in terms of Clarissa: "...it was her manner that annoyed him; timid; hard; something arrogant; unimaginative; prudish. 'The death of the soul.' He had said that instinctively, ticketing the moment as he used to do--the death of *her* soul" (*MD* 59, emphasis added). As his monologue progresses, we learn that Peter is reflecting on the day long ago when Clarissa chose Richard Dalloway instead of him. The dream, therefore, is a form of Freudian condensation; for Peter, all of life condenses into this singular tragic event, when Clarissa adopted the security and trappings of social prominence at the expense of a fulfilled life. Her choice leaves Peter forever divided: a part of him, too, is dead--the effigy in the glass--though it still haunts him from the past, while the other part will always be a child, seeking the comfort of a mother and substituting pleasure wherever he can find it. Such a dark truth cannot be easily articulated in common discourse, but when the id speaks in the language of the soul--fantasies, dreams, visions--it becomes readily apparent. Later, reflecting again on Clarissa's impact on his consciousness, he muses:

Thus she had come to him; on board ship; in the Himalayas; suggested by the oddest things.... She had influenced him more than any person he had ever known. And always in this way coming before him without his wishing it, cool, lady-like, critical; or ravishing, romantic, recalling some field or English harvest. He saw her most often in the country, not in London. One scene after another at Bourton.... (*MD* 153)

This, too, is fantasy. Peter cannot picture Clarissa in the city because he can only possess her apart from it, in rural surroundings such as at Bourton, the setting of their failed courtship. He cannot fully accept things as they are, and readers by this time have come to prefer Peter's hopeless romanticism to the facade of city life. Immediately after this reflection, ascending the stairs of his hotel, a series of mental snapshots of Clarissa appear in Peter's mind: she is on a hill, in a wood, forsaking the road for the fields, amid trees and flowers, laughing (*MD* 154).

This is certainly *not* the Clarissa readers have come to know, and yet, perhaps, we wish somehow that it were true. A series of impressions on the city ensues, a rambling lament, as Peter visualizes himself "summing up the ruin of the world...that shift in the whole pyramidal accumulation which in his youth seemed immovable" (*MD* 162). Predictably, as he arrives at Clarissa's party, the familiar anxiety returns:

The cold stream of visual impressions failed him now as if the eye were a cup that overflowed and let the rest run down its china walls unrecorded. The brain must wake now. The body must contract now, entering the house, the lighted house, where the door stood open, where the motor cars were standing, and bright women descending: the soul must brave itself to endure. He opened the big blade of his pocket-knife. (*MD* 164-165)

The party forces Peter's superego into action; he will, if only for a short time, enter Clarissa's world, threatening the life of the soul. Now the rational mind must control him, as it has

controlled Clarissa, as it has controlled an entire class of people who are similarly repressed, unable to process the horrors of war and accept the fact of an Empire in decline. Peter feels a physical reaction, his unconscious fear and anger pulsing down his arm to the blade, as he enters. If this is not madness, he must wonder, what is?

### Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway

In 1922, the War Office Committee of Enquiry in Great Britain submitted a 215-page report concerning "Shell-Shock." The report related the condition to cowardice and insubordination, concluding that these episodes resulted from a "congenital or acquired predisposition to pathological reaction in the individual concerned" (Zwerdling 30). Naturally, such a condescending attitude toward the supposed weakness of the patient led to remedies that were less than gentle. This is borne out in the depiction of Septimus's treatment by his attending physicians, Holmes and Bradshaw. Holmes refers to the illness as a "funk" and shouts "The Coward!" just after his patient leaps from the window to his death (*MD* 149). Clarissa calls the eminent Bradshaw "obscurely evil" and capable of some indescribable outrage--forcing your soul..." (*MD* 184). Freudian psychologists, by contrast, acted as "mediators rather than manipulators" in treating shell-shock (Dowling 87), an approach that would have appealed to Woolf, who had encountered the heavy-handed methods of her own doctors during her frequent breakdowns. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Holmes and Bradshaw represent the Establishment in denial, while the madness of Septimus is ironically the only sane response to the realities of post-war life. Zwerdling sums up the conflict succinctly: "Septimus Smith is instantly seen as a threat to governing-class values not only because he insists on remembering the war when everyone else

is trying to forget it, but also because his feverish intensity of feeling is an implicit criticism of the ideal of stoic impassivity" (130-131).

This intensity of feeling emerges as soul-speech almost exclusively in Septimus's interior monologues. When we first meet him, the sight of a commotion over the Prime Minister's car passing through the street terrifies him, "as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames.... The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not...rooted to the pavement, for a purpose?" (*MD* 15). His wife Rezia takes him to the park, away from the crush of people, where "leaves were alive, trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body" (*MD* 20). Soon after he interprets the birds issuing forth "from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk," singing of "how there is no death" (*MD* 24-25), and he closes his eyes to prevent seeing it, because it is "a vision of his personal future" (Dalgarno 77). The archetypes are always present in Septimus's waking state, symbols of the workings of his unconscious mind as it relates to the world around him. He perceives that he lives in a world of terrible beauty and danger. Shell-shocked from the terrible suffering he has seen in the war, and haunted by the death of his friend and fellow soldier, Evans, Septimus lacks the capacity to respond to societal pressures. There is no repression at work in Septimus; the monster has been released from the forest. We can therefore identify soul-speech in the minds of the other characters by its similarities to the psychotic ramblings of Septimus Smith. When they overflow into verbal expressions, he speaks in continual paraphrases. When faced with confinement, his aggressive instinct rises from the unconscious and possesses him fully; suicide becomes the only measure of defiance against a

society that wants to force him to deny everything he has experienced, as if it had never happened.

In the original plan for the novel, there was no Septimus; Woolf originally planned to have Clarissa kill herself, or die in some manner, at the party (Transue 98). The psychic link, therefore, between Septimus and Clarissa is deliberate and evident, especially where their story lines converge. Clarissa does not normally think in soul-speech, because her mental processes are ordered and controlled, much like her outward life. Occasionally she will struggle with the conflict between her public and private personas, such as in this reflection:

But often now this body she wore...with all its capacities, seemed nothing--nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (*MD* 11)

Early on, therefore, Clarissa's psychic qualities become clear. Unlike Peter, who sees in his reflection a separate self that is lost in the past, Clarissa sees nothing of her past left--all is swallowed up in being Mrs. Dalloway, the role Peter describes as "the perfect hostess." She aligns herself "with the rest of them," the oblivious members of the ruling class, as she makes her way through the swank sections of London. Later, at the party, she cannot shake "this feeling of being something not herself" (*MD* 171). She has carefully harnessed the monster within, repressing her outrage at elitists like Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread, and William Bradshaw, her sexual desire for Sally Seton, and her deep affection for Peter Walsh, in a masterful construct of false personhood, and yet the true self lingers, just below the surface. Clarissa takes refuge in her parties, which serve to feed the delusion, contributing to a hypocrisy committed by so many

of her peers, to live in the past rather than face the present or prepare for the sudden, swift change that is coming. Peter senses it, commenting on how much things seemed to have changed during his five years away in India, but Clarissa *knows* it. She clings to the superficial life--the fake world--she has chosen to inhabit, until it is shattered by the hard reality that a young soldier has killed himself. It is not so much the suicide that rattles her, but the fact that it is being discussed *at her party*. For a moment, a crack appears in Clarissa's facade; upon hearing the news, her thoughts dissolve into soul-speak:

He had killed himself--but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt.... Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it.

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved.

Death is defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (MD 184)

At first, Clarissa has a vision of Septimus falling, then a flash of insight that transcends place and time; for a moment, she connected with him in death. A flurry of disassociated images follow, ending with the statement, "She felt somehow very like him--the young man who had killed himself.... She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away.... He had made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble" (MD 186). This is the only place in the novel where Clarissa admits, through this emotional effusion of soul-speech, that a part of herself--the best part--has been sacrificed for something of far less value. The death of

Septimus, which prefigures, of course, the death of Virginia Woolf herself, sends the message that "one should not cling to life at the cost of one's integrity and personal dignity" (Thakur 71).

Feminist critics argue that Clarissa makes the only choice available to a woman oppressed by a patriarchal society, but Clarissa's controlled persona suggests otherwise. If she is a victim, it is only of her own need for safety and security in a terrifying and rapidly changing world. Opportunities for love and adventure came and went as she made herself into Mrs. Dalloway. With her ego firmly in charge, her one unspoken Freudian slip into soul-speech is quickly stifled, and, emotionally "reassembled," she appears at the top of the stairs in the concluding scene, an object for the beholding of Peter and the rest of her guests. The scene is almost unquestionably borrowed from Joyce's "The Dead," and yet, this is somewhat appropriate; Clarissa is the consummate "other," though not, as Lacan would say, a fragmented self, but as a thoroughly reconstructed one--a persona that exists only to be seen. For in fact, it is not through Clarissa's "beautiful caves" that we really come to know her, but through the revelations of Peter, Septimus, and others, about the society that is her refuge. It is a world in which repression may be necessary for survival, a place where monsters lurk behind masks, rustling beneath the leaves of our consciousness. To express what we see there, should we remove the masks, may be, as I think Virginia Woolf herself believed, possible only through the language of the soul.

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