

Hope Tsai

ENGL 119

Professor Abramson

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Caught in One's Head and Swept Away By Life: Water in *Mrs. Dalloway*

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf frequently draws the reader's attention to water. Before Woolf even establishes where the novel takes place, Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway's wandering thoughts land on the "morning...fresh as if issued to children on a beach" (3). With the word "beach," she dives into the waters of her memories at Bourton, thinking "What a plunge!" (3). At first glance, this repeated water motif only appears to link the life-changing summer at Bourton to the present day in London. However, a closer reading reveals the motif's more hidden purpose. Throughout the course of the novel, water's surrounding connotations shift to reflect the internal conflict of the characters. Just like one's mind, the waters of an ocean may be peaceful and calm one moment, and tumultuous the next. Similarly, though everyday life may appear motionless, an unexpected event may suddenly and violently cut through a familiar routine. Through the repeated mentions of water, Woolf shows how uncontrollable thoughts and everyday life in London can act like tidal waves, pushing and pulling the characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* until they drown or emerge, exhausted but alive.

When Mrs. Dalloway first reflects on her summer in Bourton, she describes the air as "like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave..." (3). Here, one ecological element (water) replaces another (air), highlighting just how important water is to the narrative. Water imagery pervades the text, encompassing it just as one's thoughts can utterly consume one's mind. In this sentence,

the diction paints a delightful picture; the word “flap” amidst an ocean setting brings to mind a windy but sunny day, perfect for sailing. Meanwhile, “kiss” evokes the tender feeling of being enveloped in a loved one’s arms. At this point in the novel, the connotation regarding water is positive, reflecting Mrs. Dalloway’s equally positive mindset. It’s the start of a new day, after all, and excitement runs through her as she prepares for her party. Busy with tasks, such as buying flowers, Mrs. Dalloway starts her day (and the novel) pleasantly occupied. Just like the welcoming, peaceful ocean, the tidal waves of Mrs. Dalloway’s life and thoughts are calm and steady. The five semicolons, nine commas, and three em-dashes that decorate the entire sentence lull the reader into a comfortable, pulsing rhythm. Instead of separating each thought with a full stop, Woolf uses this flowing syntax to further evoke the calm ocean tide. As a result, the swift transition to negative connotations appears even more dramatic.

Not even ten pages later, a dark cloud settles over Mrs. Dalloway. “She [has] a perpetual sense,” Woolf writes, “of being out, out, far out to sea and alone...” (11). Here, the commas serve the same purpose as before, but with a threatening undertone; the repeated word “out,” combined with “alone,” highlights Mrs. Dalloway’s feeling of loneliness. Instead of lulling the reader into a relaxing daze, the commas tug the reader out to an overcast, isolating “sea.” With each comma and each “out,” the reader drifts further away from shore, and feels the same unease lurking below Mrs. Dalloway’s thoughts. Now, her thoughts resemble a tide building and hurrying out towards the sea. She can’t stop this barrage; the commas mimic this lack of control, giving her (and the reader) slight pauses for breath before forcing her forward once more. Again, the lack of full stops mimic the tide of the sea; in this example, however, the negative connotations (such as “alone”) alter the feeling: instead of floating on a calm wave, the reader is

caught in a strong, isolating current. Similarly, Mrs. Dalloway's uncontrollable thoughts now imitate the same current.

In addition, the word "perpetual" brings to mind the constant presence of the ocean. *How longlasting is it?* The word seems to ask. *In comparison, how longlasting is Mrs. Dalloway?* With one word, the ocean transforms into a giant; Mrs. Dalloway shrinks, dwarfed by the mysterious blue waters. The word "alone" destroys the previous "kiss of a wave." Here, the ocean tides no longer possess the same loving presence as before; similarly, Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts are no longer a safe haven, as they were when she was ruminating on her past at Bourton. These negative connotations precisely reflect Mrs. Dalloway's inner, conflicted state, as she worries over her marriage and her past love ("so she would still find herself arguing...that she had been right...not to marry [Peter Walsh]"), and her "few twigs of knowledge" in the grand scheme of life and death (10, 11). Just as the diction and syntax transform from a calm wave, ebbing and flowing, into a forceful, isolating tidal wave, Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts and situation in life consume her.

As the novel progresses, Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts and life continue to mimic that of an ocean tide. Woolf further emphasizes the constant presence of water by utilizing it in one of the most important times of Mrs. Dalloway's life: meeting her husband, Richard Dalloway. In the "moonlight," Woolf writes, "they [are] going boating on the lake" (94). Is it a coincidence that the moment they fall in love happens upon water? Here, the diction is sparse but impactful; the "moonlight" evokes a feeling of peace, bringing to mind the reflection of the moon upon the calm lake. The day has finished, and the night, a time for relaxation, has come. Moreover, Woolf's choice to use a lake, rather than an ocean, should not be dismissed. Oceans possess

dangerous waves, tsunamis, and hurricanes, while lakes (due to smaller surface areas) often have smaller waves. In placing this scene on a lake, Woolf highlights how the tidal waves of Clarissa's thoughts are now even steadier and calmer than before.

The syntax in this section is simple; no longer do unruly sentences ebb and flow, accompanied by an array of semicolons, commas, and em-dashes. Instead, they are short and concise, much like Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts. In addition, for the first time, Clarissa is in control. Though boating on the lake is "Sally's mad idea," not her's, Clarissa still has agency. She decides to leave when Peter hurts her; she decides to come back and fetch him for the excursion; she decides to "[make] them all disembark and explore the island" (94). Most notably, the short sentences teem with the active voice; she even has the ability to escape the waves ("disembark"). Thus, Clarissa has control over both her thoughts and her life--she is no longer a passive bystander, surrounded and controlled by the waves. The syntax and diction regarding water make it clear that both her life and her stream of consciousness are now easy to navigate; she has survived, and the tidal waves have returned to the comforting shore.

However, Mrs. Dalloway is not the only character impacted by uncontrollable thoughts and situations in life. A foil to wealthy housewife Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus is a former soldier who regularly experiences hallucinations. When a "violent explosion" comes from a nearby car, Septimus sees "the world [wavering] and [quivering] and [threatening] to burst into flames" (21). It is not surprising that fire, the contrasting element to water, accompanies Septimus's thoughts. The words "wavering," "quivering," and "flames" make the pages smolder with an uncomfortable heat, imitating what Septimus himself feels. The repeated "and's" build like an out-of-control fire. Like fire, Septimus's thoughts consume him.

Yet, water imagery accompanies Septimus as well. In one section, Septimus sees himself as “a drowned sailor on a rock” (104). One hundred pages later, he returns to this bleak imagery, saying, “[I] was drowned...lying on a cliff” (213). In both instances, Septimus has drowned, overcome by others’ expectations (“human beings--what did *they* want?”) and his thoughts and hallucinations (the “quivering” Earth) (226). The word “drowned” signifies the end of a storm; the waves have receded. All that is left is Septimus’s body, which lies on a cold, unpleasant surface (“rock” and “cliff”). A “sailor,” he sees himself trying to conquer the ocean waves, but failing. Later on in the novel, Septimus does indeed die. While his foil, Mrs. Dalloway, “plunge[s]” into the open air at Bourton, Septimus “plunge[s]” to his death (3; 281). Though these two characters exist as foils and meet very different ends, both are occasionally consumed by their own minds and by London life. In using water imagery for both, Woolf connects the two foils, highlighting how they may not be as different as they appear.

Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf manipulates diction and syntax regarding water to evoke the tides of thoughts and everyday life. Furthermore, she uses water imagery to link the two foils of the novel, Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus; though they never cross paths, both often are submerged under their uncontrollable thoughts and lives. Yet, Septimus is the one who dies; his last breath “[makes] her feel the beauty...the fun” as Mrs. Dalloway emerges into an “extraordinary night” (284). It’s almost as if Septimus’s death serves as a sacrifice, so that Mrs. Dalloway may live. Therefore, although they share the experience of being pushed and pulled throughout the novel, perhaps there are still differences far too great a gulf to cross. “Even” in the uneventful everyday, some will drown. Some will survive.

Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1925