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Short Writing Assignment #3

Is it a party if people dance around each other, instead of with each other? In the final section of “Mrs. Dalloway,” the party scene finally arrives. With such a slow, deliberate buildup, the reader thinks, surely this scene must be filled with exciting action and dialogue! However, Woolf subverts expectations; instead of a melting pot of people, the party consists of isolated guests. Some, like Ellie Henderson, prefer to stay silent. Ellie merely observes, because the others are “all such interesting people to watch” (257). Why talk with them, and get to know them, when she can watch from afar? Furthermore, when Ellie finally does engage in conversation, it lasts only two lines; she is notably relieved, for “what more [does] one say?” (258). The circumstances are not the obstacles blocking conversation; it is the people themselves. For example, Ellie can’t even fathom what else there is to say. Restricted by her own mind, Ellie distances herself from the others, and thus loses the chance to form a community.

On the other hand, Clarissa busily exchanges pleasantries with all of her guests. She flits from “Colonel and Mrs. Garrod...” to “Mr. Hugh Whitbread...” to “Mr. Bowley...” and so on (259). Woolf liberally scatters ellipses throughout this list of unfamiliar people, highlighting the shortness of each conversation. Each name (and each conversation) drifts into the next. Neither has any weight or real importance; this is emphasized by the smooth, even tempo of the text, unaccented by intricate details. After all, there isn’t much to report: Clarissa only exchanges “six or seven words with each” (259). This raises a question: if Clarissa truly loves life, and parties are her “offering,” then what does that say about life, when her parties consist of shallow conversation and isolated people (184)?

Moreover, indirect discourse dominates the final section of the text. Parties are the perfect scenes for interaction, and yet, the characters converse more with themselves than with others. In fact, the word “felt” appears four times in one page alone, whereas direct discourse doesn’t occur even once (265). Why not directly quote Clarissa? Woolf uses indirect discourse to further convey the feeling of isolation. Just as the readers feel distanced from Clarissa, the guests feel detached from each other as well. Furthermore, when people finally do converse with one another, they keep to pleasantries only. For example, Woolf writes, “[Lady Bruton] could never think of anything to say to Clarissa; though she liked her” (273). This is highly reminiscent of Ellie’s “what more does one say?” (258). For Clarissa’s guests, it’s difficult to scale the mental wall and transform from separate, isolated people to one cohesive party. As Ellie and Lady Bruton remain content with short conversations, Clarissa continually flits from person to person, and people converse more with themselves than with others, everyone stays separate, isolated individuals.

Through this novel concerning fragmentation and isolation, perhaps Woolf is suggesting that everyday life consists of missed chances to connect. Could “Mrs. Dalloway” serve as a warning, or a call to wake up and take action? After all, true “excitement” and “ecstasy” don’t occur until Clarissa musters up the courage to reconnect with Peter (296); here, the harsh consonants pick up the pace of the text, rushing the reader to the hopeful ending. Perhaps Woolf is arguing that, without interaction, life may very well be just mindlessly counting the hours.