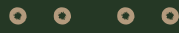


THE ART OF BEING ATTENTIVE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS. DALLOWAY*

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Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the penultimate works of modernist literature. Given its status, many scholars have analyzed the work, typically through the lens of class, gender, sexuality, or some combination of those categories. Something that often goes overlooked when viewing *Mrs. Dalloway* through those various lenses is the multitude of meaningful interactions with flowers that the novel's namesake, Clarissa Dalloway, has throughout the novel. In this essay, utilizing the multi-species theory work "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness" (Dooren, et al.), I will look at the interactions that Mrs. Dalloway has with flowers throughout the novel and discuss what interacting with flowers at specific moments does for Mrs. Dalloway.

Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the most famous modernist works to have ever been written, and because of this, many scholars have taken the time to pull the work apart piece by piece and offer their interpretations. Typically, *Mrs. Dalloway* is viewed through the lens of class, gender, or sexuality. While it is necessary to have viewed the novel through those various lenses as they all play an important role throughout the story, one lens I think we have neglected to view *Mrs. Dalloway* through is that of multispecies studies. As scholar Diana Swanson states, "Nonhuman nature—in the shapes of earth, sky, water, insects, birds, animals—holds a significant place in Woolf's fiction" (59). Nature does not simply exist in the background of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Rather, nature and the various non-human species that reside within it, particularly trees, plants, and flowers, are interwoven throughout the story. Throughout the novel, the main character Clarissa Dalloway is seen interacting with and taking notice of various plants and flowers. In some of the most pivotal scenes in the novel, Mrs. Dalloway can be seen interacting with or thinking about at least one type of flower. When people discuss Clarissa's interactions with flowers, typically, they are focusing on the flowers as a symbol, and the specific meaning that has been assigned to each flower. While I do intend to discuss the symbolism of a few specific flowers as well as what flowers symbolize in general in the novel, I more so intend to focus on the interactions between Clarissa and her flowers and how the flowers are acting or contributing to her life during specific moments in the story and as a whole. In order to bring Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* into the realm of multispecies studies, I will be utilizing a work entitled "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness" by Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster to describe the attentiveness that Clarissa gives to the flowers that she interacts with throughout the story. While *Mrs. Dalloway* is most certainly a novel about class, gender, and sexuality, it is also, above all else, a novel about life. Because *Mrs. Dalloway* is a story about life, it makes sense for Woolf to have included so many references to non-human species throughout her stories, as a story about life is not com-

plete without mentioning the multitude of non-human species that reside on this earth with us. By including so many interactions with and references to flowers and the natural world, Woolf is attempting to show us how interacting with species outside of our own in meaningful ways adds to our lives, as well as how not doing so has significant consequences. Before I begin my analysis of the interactions between Clarissa and the various plants she mentions, I feel it is important to discuss what multispecies studies is as well as what it means to be attentive to the non-human species around us. Multispecies studies is a method of exploring the world in a way that does not simply center humans. Rather, the goal of multispecies studies is to pay attention to the non-human species that are all around us, whether those species be plants, animals, or insects. In “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” the various authors explore “modes of both paying attention to others and crafting meaningful response” (van Dooren, et al. 1). We see Clarissa Dalloway do both of these things in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa pays great attention to the flowers she comes across and she listens to what the flowers say, and to the emotions they make her feel. We see Clarissa interact with flowers or plants in moments in which she is feeling overwhelmed, and they remind her to live in the moment rather than in the past or the future.

The opening line of *Mrs. Dalloway* is one of the most memorable quotes to have ever come from a piece of literature, and it reads as follows: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (Woolf 4). This quote sets up what will be a very important symbol throughout the entirety of the book. Mentioned time and time again, flowers hold very significant meaning for Clarissa. While each flower in *Mrs. Dalloway* holds its own, individual meaning, I think that flowers as a whole are meant to represent life, and are a reminder to live in the present. As I am about to explore, it would seem that Clarissa reaches for flowers during moments in which she is having difficulty processing her complex emotions or living in the moment.

Before Clarissa enters the florist’s shop, there were a million thoughts racing through her head. She was thinking of her beloved daughter, Eliza-

beth, and of Elizabeth's dog, Grizzle. Then her thoughts soured when she began to think of her disapproval of Elizabeth's friend Ms. Kilman. She then began to think of her illness, and how it combined with her dislike for Ms. Kilman made this hatred brew inside her. However, as soon as Clarissa entered the florist's shop, everything changed. She was immediately captivated by the beauty that surrounded her, thinking "[t]here were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac: and carnations, masses of carnations" (Woolf 9). Once Clarissa saw the flowers, the anxious thoughts pacing back and forth in her mind ceased. Suddenly, Clarissa was no longer stuck within her own mind. The sight of the flowers reminded her to step back into the present moment, as if they were saying to her that she is alive, and so are they, and that she should be present in the world with them. Clarissa listens to what the flowers have to say to her and she immediately steps back into the present moment. By listening to the flowers, Clarissa gives them agency. She also gives the flowers agency in one of the quotes that follows shortly after the previous, which reads, "And it was the moment between six and seven when every flower—roses, carnations, irises, lilac—glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds" (Woolf 9). Here, the flowers are able to have individual agency and are capable of individual action. As scholar Betty Rychen so eloquently puts it, "The flowers which Mrs. Dalloway buys for her party and the scene in the florist's shop as she chooses them prepare the reader for a deeper sense of her identity" (Rychen 18). This scene in which we see Clarissa listen to the flowers around her allows us a closer look into Clarissa's personality. It shows us how she is attentive to the non-human species around her and it also shows us her keen attention to detail, making her a master at the art of being attentive (van Dooren, et al). Clarissa not only creates a meaningful interaction with flowers by giving them agency, but also by listening to how they make her feel and associating them with important people in her life. One such flower that she does this with is the rose.

Roses are mentioned frequently throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* and play a significant role in the novel. As I previously mentioned, it would seem that

Clarissa often associates specific flowers with specific people in her life. In her mind, Clarissa associates her husband, Richard, with roses (Shearer). Roses are a complex flower when it comes to determining what they mean. Typically, they represent love, and when a rose is of a specific color, it can change the type of love being conveyed (Shearer). One moment in the novel in which roses are mentioned is when Richard gives Clarissa a bouquet of red and white roses. Woolf writes “He was holding out flowers—roses, red and white roses” (Woolf 72). The roses that Richard chooses to give Clarissa are red and white, a choice I believe was purposefully made by Woolf. Red roses are a symbol of a true, passionate love and white roses are meant to convey unswerving loyalty (Thompson). However, the combination of these two specific colors of roses is seen as “a symbol of unity” (Shearer). Scholar Jeanne Shearer explains that Clarissa’s identity is tied to her being married to her husband, Richard, and that she primarily only sees herself as being Mrs. Dalloway, a loyal wife and a perfect party host. She goes on to explain that “[t]he roses Richard gives her represent this unity with him,” the unity she is referring to being the loyal, dedicated marriage the two share (Shearer). Because Clarissa associates much of her identity with being a wife, and since Richard often chooses to give her roses, it makes sense that they would be mentioned so often throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*.

What is happening when Richard gives Clarissa the roses is important to note as well. Before Richard walks in with the roses, Clarissa is worrying about whether or not she should invite someone to her party that she initially didn’t want to invite (Woolf 71). However, when Richard walks in and Clarissa sees that he’s holding out roses for her to take, she is immediately pulled out of her anxious thoughts. In this scene, the flowers are once again acting as a reminder to Clarissa to live in the present, and to not worry so much about what is to come. While roses are certainly an important symbol in *Mrs. Dalloway*, there is one more flower that I must discuss as it is mentioned at the penultimate moment of the novel: the beginning of Clarissa Dalloway’s heavily anticipated party.

The final moment I want to discuss in which Clarissa is attentive to

the non-human species around her is towards the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*, at the beginning of the party. The party does not truly begin until the moment in which Clarissa notices how “[g]ently the yellow curtain with all the birds of Paradise blew out and it seemed as if there were a flight of wings in the room, right out, then sucked back” (Woolf 101). The story has been building up to this moment, readers are watching Clarissa prepare for this party all day, and now it has finally, at long last, begun. This could be considered a multispecies interaction in one of two ways, either seeing the “birds of Paradise” as actual birds or as the plant with the same name. Based on the numerous mentions of plants Clarissa has made throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* up until this point, I am going to see this interaction as being one between Clarissa and the bird of paradise plant rather than an interaction between Clarissa and an animal. There is also the fact that Clarissa lives in England, and it would make more sense for the “birds of Paradise” she is referring to to be a plant since colorful, tropical birds that we tend to call birds of paradise are not native to England. The bird of paradise plant can grow to be quite large, and when properly cared for, they can bloom with orange or white flowers whose petals resemble those of the feathers on a bird, making the name quite fitting and also making it difficult to distinguish the flowers from an actual bird upon first glance (Hensley, et al 1). The bird of paradise is an incredibly majestic plant—it is impossible to ignore the presence of one in a room. The large size of the plant and its bright flowers grasp your attention, and you cannot help but to be in awe of its beauty. Choosing such a magnificent plant to mark the true beginning of Clarissa’s party was a masterful choice on Woolf’s part.

Again, it is important for us to examine what was happening in the moments before Clarissa takes notice of the bird of paradise plant. At this point in the novel, the guests have begun to arrive at Clarissa’s party. She greets a few guests, including her old friend Peter Walsh. After greeting the various guests that had just arrived, Clarissa becomes overwhelmed. She thinks to herself, “Oh dear, it was going to be a failure; a complete failure...She could see Peter out of the tail of her eye, criticizing her” (Woolf 101). Now that her guests have begun to arrive, Clarissa is scared

that her party is going to be an absolute failure. Her seeing Peter and being under the impression that he is criticizing her really spikes Clarissa's anxiety. However, once again, when Clarissa spots the magnificent bird of paradise plant from across the room, she is transported out of her own head and back into reality. Yet again, we see Clarissa being attentive to a member of a non-human species, listening to what they are telling her and taking their advice: to live in the real world, with her beloved flowers, rather than in her own head.

Although Clarissa is ever so attentive to the non-human species that surround her, particularly various flowers and plants, there is one character in *Mrs. Dalloway* that does not practice this attentiveness towards the non-human species that surround him. The character that I am referring to is Peter Walsh. Peter serves as a foil to Clarissa. Whereas Clarissa lives in the present, sometimes being pulled back to it by the flowers she loves so dearly, Peter does not. Peter lives in the past, and is absorbed by the regret he carries for not marrying Clarissa. While Peter does occasionally reflect back on his past and will recall a flower or plant that he saw, his recollection of the non-human species he witnessed at whatever particular moment in his past that he is reflecting on does not pull him back to the present. Woolf makes it clear in the very beginning that Peter is not attentive, nor cares to be attentive, to the non-humans around him. In a scene early on in the novel in which Clarissa is walking around a garden, he asks her if she is "[m]using amongst the vegetables?" and then continues, stating "I prefer men to cauliflowers" (Woolf 4). Peter is unlike Clarissa in the way that he does not give the non-human species around him agency, and in turn, he does not listen to what they have to say. This really detracts from Peter's life, and does not aid in his healing from his past. If he would be attentive to the plants around him, he may be reminded to live in the present rather than the past, just as Clarissa is when she pays attention to the plants around her.

As scholar Matthew Delsesto states, "Being human means being in constant contact and communication with plants" (Delsesto). This is something that Woolf understands very clearly, as evident by Clarissa's many

interactions with plants in *Mrs. Dalloway*. By looking more closely at the meaningful associations that Clarissa creates with flowers and important people in her life, such as her husband, as well as the reverent way she interacts with flowers, we can learn how to be more attentive of the non-human species in our lives. By interacting with the flowers she comes across in an attentive way, she crafts a “meaningful response” to the interaction (van Dooren, et al. 1). The way that Clarissa interacts with flowers in *Mrs. Dalloway* shows us a new way of interacting with the non-human species in our lives. Through listening to the flowers and the feelings that they provoked within her, Clarissa Dalloway showed all of us a meaningful way of interacting with the plants around us. She showed us that when we are feeling overwhelmed by our emotions or with the stress of our daily lives, we need only look for the beauty of a flower to remind us to live in the moment.

Flowers play an important role in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. The main character of the novel, Clarissa Dalloway, interacts with the plants around her in a very meaningful way. She touches them and observes them very carefully, allowing them to evoke certain emotions within her. By listening to the emotions that each flower Clarissa interacted with evoked, she combined two very important aspects of her life: flowers and the people she loved. Clarissa is so aware of the plants that she sees in the single day that we see in her life, and we could all stand to learn to be more like her in that way. Clarissa’s interactions with flowers are also meaningful in the way that the flowers she sees and touches pull her out of her emotions—out of her head—and into the present moment. Woolf also shows us in her novel what not being attentive to the non-human species around us can take away from our lives through Peter Walsh, who is stuck in the past and cannot pull himself into the present because of his tendency to hold onto his regrets as well as his not paying attention to the multitude of species that he encounters in his life that would remind him to live in the moment with them. Not only did Clarissa create meaningful interaction between herself and the various flowers she loves so very much, she showed us, the readers of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a way in which we can be more

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attentive of what the non-human species around us, including flowers and plants, can add to our lives.

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