

Flowers Speak: Exploring the Floral Motif in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (2556). From the story’s opening in medias res, the reader is immediately led to believe that flowers will play an important role in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Throughout her narrative, Virginia Woolf masterfully weaves a floral motif, scattering references like petals that the reader must gather into a bouquet of significance. In ninety-nine pages of text, Woolf chooses to inject no less than fifty floral references. Floral allusions are part of the imagery that literary critic Sigrid Nunez declares makes this novel memorable (Nunez 2657-58). The author’s choice of floral species and color is purposefully metaphoric and intended to reveal nuances not readily apparent in the text upon first reading . . .

It is apparent in the text that Mr. and Mrs. Dalloway share neither marital bed nor relations. She retreats to her solitary attic room “[l]ike a nun withdrawing” with “a virginity preserved through childbirth. She [Clarissa] had failed him [Richard]” (2571-72). Through this inner admission, again Woolf injects the floral motif. A “crocus” appears in Clarissa’s thoughts “of women together...for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning” in the flower (2572). It was “an inner meaning almost expressed” (2572). The crocus speaks in this scene of the sexual fervor that lacks in Clarissa’s marriage, yet stirs within her. The lengthy paragraph describes in detail how she felt “what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough” (2572). The fact that she is alone in a room of her own while these thoughts meander through her mind, exemplifies her emotional detachment from others. The floral motif is woven here by Woolf into a blanket of homoeroticism. Literary critic Jane Marcus calls Clarissa “the lesbian who marries for safety and appearances, produces a child, cannot relate sexually to her husband, and

chooses celibacy within marriage, no sex rather than the kind she wants” (Kennard 156-57). This is not the only instance in which, through the use of flowers, Clarissa’s sexuality is displayed as private, though perhaps not solitary.

In narrative regression of time, Clarissa was amazed by Sally Seton’s “way with flowers” (2573). The reader can surmise that it is from Sally that Clarissa adopted her captivation with flowers as was apparent by her visit to Mulberry’s Florist several years later. It is Woolf’s metaphoric use of flowers that clues the reader in to Clarissa’s homosexual tendencies, this time stirred specifically by Sally. Clarissa’s sexual exploration began in her teens with Sally’s arrival at Bourton, Clarissa’s family home, for the summer. “Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was. She [Clarissa] knew nothing about sex” when Sally arrived (2573). Sally picked out “all sorts of flowers” (2573), yet Woolf chooses to specifically mention only two strains by name. “Sally went out, picked hollyhocks, dahlias – all sorts of flowers... – cut their heads off, and made them swim on the top of water in bowls” (2573). These phallic references, intentionally used by Woolf, cannot be overlooked. It is common botanist knowledge that dahlias have a long woody stem. Similarly, to look upon hollyhocks, one cannot help but notice their tall upright stem . . .

Flowers are used by Woolf not only to elusively speak homosexual undertones, but heterosexual ones as well. The floral motif is prominently woven into a scene in which Richard Dalloway, “very eager to travel that spider’s thread of attachment between himself and Clarissa,” buys a bouquet of red and white roses for his wife (2615). Roses traditionally symbolize intense love and passion, but in this case they (the love and passion) are as thin and as delicate as a thread spun by a spider. He chooses the colors red and white. “[R]ed, the lover’s rose, signifies

enduring passion; white, humility and innocence” (Teleflora, “Color Meaning”). He headed toward home “[b]earing his flowers like a weapon. [H]e could not bring himself to say he loved her” (2616). This latter phrase is emphatically repeated twice. For Clarissa to receive Richard’s humble passion, as tokened by the roses, would wound her. Roses were “the only flowers [Clarissa] could bear to see cut” (2618). Why is it so easy for Clarissa to see love and passion cut off at the source of their life force? Yet, Woolf tells us that “the effect was extraordinary” when Sally cut off the heads of flowers for the dining table years ago (2573) . . .

Thus far a case can be made that the use of floral references speaks of Clarissa’s homosexuality, both directly as with the case of Sally and indirectly in her lack of affection for Richard. But Clarissa may be “described as bisexual rather than homosexual.” Though she has no “sexual feelings towards her spouse,” she “is described as having earlier heterosexual drives...for Peter Walsh” (Kennard 157). This attraction has not completely dissipated despite the passage of years. “Take me with you, Clarissa thought impulsively” (2580) when Peter came to visit her upon his return from an extended stay in India. In fact, a tinge of regret at having chosen Richard is also recognized at the same meeting. “If I had married him [Peter], this gaiety would have been mine all day!” (2580). Woolf’s floral motif pervades Peter and Clarissa’s reunion scene in two ways. The first involves . . . There is a second way in which Woolf’s floral motif pervades the reunion scene. Clarissa knows she is showing signs of her advanced years. She is “feeling herself suddenly shriveled, aged, breastless” (2571). As Peter leaves her house, he notices her “swinging baskets” hanging and pale (2584). Again, flowers are used to reflect the state of a character in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The geraniums are “pale” (2584); like Clarissa, they have lost their vividness and attract-ability . . .

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