

19TH CENTURY WOMEN AND HOMOSEXUALITY: THE CASE OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS. DALLOWAY*

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Abstract: Woolf's Mrs Dalloway portrays the experience of a 19th century woman in dealing with homosexuality. The incapability to show affection to the same sex, the denial of the feeling and the struggle to keep the love leads the woman to an emotional suicide. The woman's choice to marry a man, have a child, and play her role as a sophisticated housewife are the ways to compromise with the norms and conventions of that age where home was the centre of woman's life.

Key words: 19th century woman, homosexuality, housewife

INTRODUCTION

The fact that legally women were not considered able to Clarissa Dalloway's first encounter with women's love started from the arrival of Sally Seton in Bourton. That arrival changed her life totally. Sally's role in eighteen-year-old Clarissa was very crucial in leading Clarissa to her present life. Sally Seton for young Clarissa was the representation of a woman she was not:

It was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired, dark, large-eyed, with that quality which, since she hadn't got it herself, she always envied - a sort of abandonment, as if she could say anything, do anything; a quality much commoner in foreigners than in Englishwomen.

(Mrs. Dalloway, 37)

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Sally broke the rules and norms of those days; she smoked cigarette, run from the bathroom naked, cut flowers in unordinary way, and even stole the chicken. Sally brought female vitality had not known by Clarissa before: 'Sally's power was amazing, her gift, her personality' (Mrs. Dalloway, 38).

The climax of her memory of Sally was when Sally kissed her, at that moment Clarissa found the truth about herself and her feeling to Sally:

Then came the most exquisite moment if her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The world might have turn upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally.

(Mrs. Dalloway, 40)

Clarissa felt the love she never experienced, the first female-bond she knew:

It was not like one's feeling for a man. It was completely disinterested, and besides, it had a quality which could only exist between women, between women just grown up. It was protective, on her side; sprang from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage as a catastrophe), which led to this chivalry, this protective feeling which was much more on her side than Sally.

(Mrs. Dalloway, p. 39)

Clarissa's feeling for Sally rose an awareness of her love to Sally. Moreover, Clarissa's love for Sally was more than physical love. It was likely that Sally could fulfil her need for mother's figure. According to Abel (1992), Clarissa's childhood was a tableau of female loss: a dead mother, a dead sister, a distant father, and a stern maiden aunt, therefore Sally's ability to nurture Clarissa's heart took over the role of mother for Clarissa:

Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was. She knew nothing about sex- nothing about social problems. ... There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world.

(Mrs. Dalloway, 38)

Clarissa's feeling for Sally was very precious for her, but she knew that as a respectable woman, she should not love Sally: 'And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it - a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, ...' (Mrs.

Dalloway, p.40).’ It was a secret between Sally and herself. That feeling should be hidden because women of 19th century were supposed to impart high moral standard of behaviour which definitely excluded homosexuality (Lewis, 1984).

Clarissa’s love for Sally prevented her from marrying Peter, her first love. Peter loved Clarissa and she loved him, yet she did not want to marry him because she felt that she would be bound to him, incapable to be herself: ‘... with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into (Mrs. Dalloway, 10)’. If she married Peter, the passion and freedom she had in her relationship with Sally would disappear: ‘Why always take, never give? (Mrs. Dalloway, 184)’. Sally’s love was different, she filled what Clarissa lacked of, Sally did not take but she gave: ‘Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was (Mrs. Dalloway, 38).’

Yet, although Clarissa chose not to marry Peter, she married Richard. The reason was likely that as a 19th century woman she was framed to be a respectable woman thus followed her instinct to love Sally was impossible. She was married because she cared about her safety and appearance (Marcus, 1983). Peter described Clarissa’s choice by saying: ‘The obvious thing to say of her was that she was worldly; cared too much for rank and society and getting on in the world’ (Mrs. Dalloway, 85). Clarissa’s husband, Richard, served his role well, he gave her a respectable life as a wife of a MP (Member of Parliament).

Clarissa also chose Richard because at least he did not dominate her: ‘For in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him’ (Mrs. Dalloway, p. 10). Clarissa felt that Richard gives her room both physically and mentally to be herself.

Clarissa’s choice to get married made her take the consequence as well. By marrying to Richard, she denied her feeling to Sally. Clarissa was unable to fulfil her sexual role as Richard’s wife. In her marriage, Clarissa put companionate love over romantic love. Clarissa failed Richard in their sexual relationship for her longing for a woman’s charm:

... yet she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly. And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some

accident- like a faint scent, or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sounds at certain moments), she did undoubtedly feel what men felt.

(Mrs. Dalloway, 36)

Yet, when she occupied herself with a woman's and wife's role, the denial of her love to Sally made her feel that she began to lose her identity. She felt that she was not the same Clarissa anymore, she did not even recognise herself:

She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street; this is being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this is being Mrs. Richard Dalloway.

(Mrs. Dalloway, 13)

By choosing to marry Richard and playing the role of a wife and mother Clarissa began to feel that she sacrificed her own identity. She committed an emotional suicide by being someone else, someone respectable and secure. However, Clarissa's choices can be understood because as a middle class women in 19th century, it was very difficult to view a woman as having a separate identity from the centre of her world, her home (Lewis, 1984).

Clarissa's inability to serve the role of a real wife made her chose to live like a nun. Her withdrawal from wife and husband relationship was in a way described her spiritual preservation. She preserved her love to Sally by killing her physical needs and turning to a spiritual life. Clarissa's choice to live like a nun was not something uncommon. In the early 1920's, most women were not familiar with the idea of sexual pleasure, many women were brought up thinking that sexual passion is both sinful and having something to do with the animal kingdom than with human society, they were the moral preserver of the society and they were expected to be pure and passionless (Lewis, 1984). The expectation over purity and responsibility for the family often caused women to choose living in celibacy because this choice gives some women the status of freedom from the family bond (Marcus, 1983). For Clarissa, living as a nun set her free from her duty as a wife and a way to keep her love for Sally. Lewis (1984) describes the issue of women's desire for other women by saying that at in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century the passionate and disturbing love from one woman to the other was transformed to the spiritual searching, thus make duty and need could not be separated.

The attic room where Clarissa slept can be seen as the symbol of her withdrawal but she also felt: 'There was an emptiness about the heart of life.' (Mrs. Dalloway, 35). The lost of enjoyment in her present life is described as well by the description of her bed, 'Narrower and narrower would her bed be.' (Mrs. Dalloway, p. 35). Abel (1992) associates Clarissa's bed as a grave which relates to the death of Clarissa's adult sexuality.

Moreover, Clarissa's relationship with Miss Kilman, her daughter's tutor is even more very complicated. It was a love-hate relationship:

For it was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants; for no doubt with another throw of the dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No.

(Mrs. Dalloway, 15)

Clarissa did not hate Miss Kilman personally but the idea of who she was. It was likely that Clarissa hated Miss Kilman because the tutor reminded her of herself. Miss Kilman loved Clarissa's daughter, Elisabeth, the way Clarissa loved Sally, as a woman. Miss Kilman reminds her of the desire to love another woman.

Her hatred towards Miss Kilman was the reflection of her hatred towards her fate. It was like looking at herself in the mirror. Clarissa and Miss Kilman felt something that was not supposed to be felt according to the society. Clarissa hated Miss Kilman because she reminded Clarissa of her denial in her life. Yet, Clarissa could not totally hate Miss Kilman because if she hated Miss Kilman it means that she hated herself as well.

Jensen (1983) sees Clarissa's love-hate feeling toward Miss Kilman as a reflection of her feeling guilty. While both of them find their love in women, they are happened to be in different social class. Clarissa, as a middle-class woman, focused her life in a more selfish life of social vanity while as a lower-class woman, Miss Kilman's life was more toward productive social life. Miss Kilman's poverty and her way of life always reminded Clarissa of how meaningless and artificial her life was.

Furthermore, the hate felt by Clarissa might be also caused by her protectiveness toward Elizabeth. Clarissa knew that her daughter was very fond of Miss Kilman therefore she was afraid that Elizabeth would fall in love with Miss Kilman the way Clarissa loved Sally. She did not want Elizabeth to face the problem she had and had to choose the path she chose for she knew how painful it was.

The party in the end of the novel is the climax of Clarissa's choice. Her fight to deny her desire for woman led her toward desperation. Clarissa felt that she no longer existed. Even her party, her place to find a refuge failed her: 'Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, ...' (Mrs. Dalloway, 187). Her desperation was emphasised by her meeting with Sally who was then a mother of five boys. The meeting showed her how different their lives at that time, although she still loved Sally but it was not the same anymore. Both of them were not free, they had to obey their society's norms and conventions to be wives and mothers. The moment when Sally met Clarissa gave her insight that they had belonged to different worlds:

They kissed each other, first this cheek, then that, by the drawing-room door, and Clarissa turned, with Sally's hand in hers, and saw her rooms full, heard the roar of voices, saw the candlesticks, the blowing curtains, and the roses which Richard had given her.

(Mrs. Dalloway ,188)

Clarissa's holding Sally's hands symbolises her past but her looking at the party symbolises her present.

CONCLUSION

Clarissa's denial of her love for Sally represents 19th century women's attitude toward homosexuality which was considered as unusual. However, her decision to marry Richard represents her consciousness of the social conventions and norms practised in her time where home was the centre of women's world. Clarissa's struggle to make and keep her choices is women's struggle to make and keep their choices. It is also the reflection of women's desire to be themselves. Finally, Clarissa's decision to keep on alive can be seen as women's determination to fight for their rights.

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