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Professor Eric Miller COLT 28: Mind Reading

**Paper 2: Mrs. Dalloway**

Peter Walsh and Sally Seton are Clarissa’s two great loves from her youth. We readers see a great deal of Peter Walsh’s inner life. (Along with Clarissa and Septimus, he is one of the three major characters of the novel.) By contrast, we see nothing of Sally Seton’s inner life, neither her memories of Bourton, nor her inner thoughts about her present life, which is less than even for many of the quite minor characters. Why? What is that about?

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel by Virginia Woolf that explores the connection between the minds of individuals, time, and reality. In this novel, we get a deeper understanding of the thoughts and sentiments of the characters through Virginia Woolf’s weaving of narrated monologue and the thoughts of different characters (about others and previous life experiences). This process allows Virginia Woolf to highlight the interconnectedness of different minds and to effectively switch timeframes from the present to a specific time in the past based on a character’s memory. As a result, readers tend to understand the different dimensions of a character’s personality and not classify characters based on the binary outcome of good or bad. Despite the story revolving around characters like Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus, another primary character who is talked about and seems to have influenced Clarissa is Sally Seton. Although we learn a lot about Sally, from her childhood to her personality to her current profession of running a newspaper, the audience never experiences the story from her point of view. As a result, we cannot fully understand her thoughts and feelings to get to know Sally. Instead, we have to settle for others’ descriptions of her and her actions without understanding why she decides to pursue particular courses of action or her outlook on the events of her life and the world around her. Sally Seton is described by other characters, particularly Clarissa, as an enigma because of her nonconformal behavior and ideologies. Clarissa herself says, “For Sally was a riddle,” when describing Sally’s positive nature and nonconformal behavior. We do not get to see the inner thoughts of Sally because even the narrator cannot understand her personality to describe it to the reader. The only person who could potentially understand Sally is Virginia Woolf herself because Sally is one of her creations or based on her interpretations of a contact she knew personally. Another equally challenging theory is that Virginia Woolf potentially never wrote Mrs. Dalloway from Sally’s perspective because she also couldn’t understand Sally. As a result, leaving Sally as a mystery not only adds a twist to the reader’s understanding of Mrs. Dalloway but also prompts the reader to question whether they truly know any of the characters or people in their lives.

One of the distinguishing nonconformal characteristics is her joyful nature. By getting to know the inner workings of other characters’ minds, we see the highs and lows of their emotions. Most of the characters in this novel seem to be isolated from others because of their problems, implying that everyone in public feels the same. All the key characters, including Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus, seem to have a semi-depressed persona because of their separation from everyone else. A narrated monologue of Peter says, “He stood alone; he raised his hand to his eyes, absorbed in thought, alone.” A narrated monologue of Septimus says, “He was alone. He was unheeded, happy, and near to the wild heart of life.” A narrated monologue of Clarissa says, “She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone[.]” Septimus proves to be the only unconventional exception because he enjoys being alone as it separates him from people and factors that trigger his PTSD. The paradox of the other characters is that they feel alone despite being surrounded by people most of the time. Sally, however, is seen as a positive force of nature, highlighting herself among the personalities of those around her. When describing Sally, Clarissa says, “How could she keep this thing, this machine, this flood of vitality, going, when one after another they went under?” This quotation highlights the incomprehension others feel about Sally’s personality because her behavior contradicts what was expected of other human beings by Clarissa and the other characters. No one understands how Sally can remain joyful when everyone around her feels desolate. This disconnect between Sally and the other characters sets her apart and why she cannot be put into words by the narrator, the characters, and the author as effectively as the other characters can.

The only connection I can draw between the inability of others to know the workings of Sally Seton and my life is by watching Lionel Messi play football. Messi is better than the other players, so instead of trying to describe how good he is, I just sit back and enjoy his show. Similarly, Virginia Woolf might have intended for the other characters to enjoy Sally Seton’s company without analyzing and trying to understand why she was so different from a ‘regular’ person. My takeaway from this novel is that through Sally, I see that being happy is a choice one has to make. Like the rest of us, I am sure Sally had problems. However, she did not let them weigh her emotions and chose to pursue her passions. By choosing to be happy, she could lead a better life than those around her. Likewise, we have to choose to be happy and focus on the positive things in life instead of the negatives.