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### Hegemony Condemned in Mrs. Dalloway

On 19 June 1923 Virginia Woolf declared in her diary, “I want to criticise the social system and to show it at work, at its most intense...” (Woolf, *Diary* 248). Despite the traditional opinions of E. M. Forster<sup>1</sup> and Jean Guignet<sup>2</sup> that Woolf was not interested in politics or improving society, Mrs. Dalloway is a social novel (Zwerdling 120). The ravages of hegemony, the strong influence of a dominant social group over lesser, poorer members of society, were explored, and exposed in Mrs. Dalloway. Woolf cried out in her “Why?” essay, “Why not create a new form of society founded on poverty and equality?” (Woolf, *Moth* 231). Therefore, Woolf exposes “the despicableness” (Thakur 55) of the upper class members and “the exploitation of man by man” (Zwerdling 120) on that single June day in London. Although they try diligently to rise above the upper class social restraints, the exploited individuals revealed in Mrs. Dalloway obtain only insecurity, loneliness, and death. Thus Woolf exposed the egregious behavior of the upper class, presented the ravages of hegemony, and foretold the imminent demise of the old social order in England through literary symbols, setting, and satire (Thakur 71).

Although Virginia Stephens (later Woolf) was born into a wealthy, upper class family, she had a personal reason for her choice to expose the evils of hegemony in this novel. Woolf experienced oppression, not of a social group, but of a gender group: male society. When Woolf was a child, her brothers physically abused her (Bell 43-4). Even as an adult, her life was dramatically narrowed through the collusion of her male doctor and her husband who forbade her

having children (Novak 125). Through this suffering, she identified with those social underdogs in the society around her; she also analyzed the flaws in the social elite among whom she lived and worked. Woolf chose to expose those flaws in Mrs. Dalloway.

Woolf's method embodied the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century age of "modernism" in literature for she developed a "focus on the literary symbol" (Quinn 201). Symbols "large and small" were used "as a means of revealing the 'truth' through images where words no longer possess[ed] an adequate power of expression" (Rehder 3). The symbols of hegemony that Woolf wove into this novel are likewise multi-faceted. Each "figure seems to radiate a range of shifting, fragile meanings, some specific, others infinite in their extension, aspects of existence that would be otherwise inexpressible" (Quinn 316). To produce this effect, Woolf employed symbolism that pointed, and then moved the audience on into something else; it expanded (Marsh 91). In her essay, "Craftsmanship," Woolf explains, "it is the nature of words to mean many things" (Woolf, *Death* 201). Such a detailed symbol, according to Woolf, should, "not cease to be itself by becoming something else" (Woolf, *Death* 108-109; Thakur 3). Rather, it should be similar to that which it represents and should "heighten, enlarge, and make it splendid" (Woolf, *Reader* 49).

In Mrs. Dalloway, hats perform just such an enlarging, representative function. During the 1920s, hats for gentlemen and ladies were fashion necessities, especially for the well to do (Ziska). The first symbolic hat that appears in this novel belongs to Mrs. Dalloway herself. It reveals the pressure of the upper class to "measure up," for as Mrs. Dalloway passes the "almost too well-dressed" courtier, Hugh Whitbread, she feels "oddly conscious...of her hat" (Woolf, *MD* 6). Her hat seems not quite up to social standards; therefore, she feels inferior and insecure.

In a second, expanding symbolic picture, Clarissa's hat provides some shade from the "heat o' the sun" (9). The hat evokes an image of protection from the "immortal presence" of upper class British society, a society ruling in an imperialistic empire upon which the sun never set,<sup>3</sup> a society relentlessly beaming its social heat down upon its subjects (18). The hat does not provide adequate protection, for she has lost some of her identity. She is "not even Clarissa any more" (11). Therefore, when the novel begins, she is identified as, "Mrs. Dalloway." She lost her Christian name when she committed nuptial suicide; she chose to marry an ambitious social climber. A victim of the social hierarchy Clarissa "needed people...saying things she didn't mean, blunting the edge of her mind, losing her discrimination" (78). Her mind needs better protection; her hat clearly is not "the right hat..." (6). Along with Clarissa's hat, Peter Walsh's sharp, yet hidden, pocket knife validates this picture of Clarissa for it represents the "side of her own nature that she decided to suppress when she accepted Richard Dalloway" (Marsh 95). Clarissa is swept under the tide of the social order and loses some of her identity when she weds a man with a promising career in parliament. Therefore, her hat, instead of providing protection, provokes insecurity.

Thirdly, the removal of Mrs. Dalloway's hat symbolizes her return to the support of and participation in the female race. After she arrives in her attic room and lays her hat down, she becomes a social equal, not a social climber. "In laying aside her hat she [Clarissa] renounces her coquettish self-consciousness in a return to 'sisterliness'" (Minow-Pinkney 67) with the other conquered members of society, including Evelyn Whitbread (Woolf, *MD* 6). Much as a warrior lays down his battle helmet after the fray, Clarissa has removed her quiescent protection, her social status symbol.

In further expanding symbolism, the hat's significance pertains to Lucrezia and Septimus. Lucrezia is a hat maker by trade. Her millenary creed asserts, "It is the hat that matters most" (87). Her symbolic goal in her vocation is to afford her customers some protection from the furnace of societal pressure. Septimus, her husband, feels that "hats being made protected him; he was assured of safety; he had a refuge" (87). Of all the characters in this novel, Septimus, a troubled war veteran, has the most urgent need for a hat. He is married to a hat maker yet he ironically has no hat of his own. The only mention of a hat for Septimus in Mrs. Dalloway tells us that, "he hung it up and it fell down" (146). Consequently, death takes him; he is a victim of hegemony for he has no hat to shade him from the pervasive heat wave of the social aristocracy.

In a final symbolic view of the hat, it represents the joy of work and creativity. Septimus has a wonderful and rare moment of lucidity while he and Lucrezia decorate a hat (143-4). Unfortunately, this is just before he is pushed to suicide by the unwelcome approach of Doctor Holmes, a representative of the socially privileged class. Septimus still has no hat of his own.

Another item of clothing, Miss Kilman's mackintosh coat stands as a surface symbol of rebellion against hegemony; Kilman "did not dress to please" (123). Characteristically, Woolf goes deeper; the coat represents Kilman's attempt to create an impervious outer shell of protection from the strong feelings of inferiority induced by women of Mrs. Dalloway's ilk. Ultimately, however, Kilman's inexpensive wrap only reveals that she is another casualty of hegemony. She perspires; social heat has baked her into a hard, "callous" woman (12). The "spray of an exhausted wave" (128) cannot refresh her; her mind has closed (Thakur 58). Irony again characterizes the social war for the mackintosh is a trap instead of a fortress. Kilman is isolated, rejected, and conquered in her coat.

Nature also flourishes symbolically in this novel. In the first paragraph of Mrs. Dalloway, flowers “link [Clarissa] to ‘divine vitality’” (Novak 115). In this glimpse of her, she is youthful and unspoiled by society. Thus, in the florist’s shop, flowers represent a fresh new social order, a needed revival for a country ravaged by war. Clarissa muses upon the name of each flower for she wants “their particular uniqueness identified and preserved, as Clarissa wishes people’s individuality to be” (Kostkowska 189). These flowers represent the lovely variety of human beings found in a society free from the meltdown of conversion imposed by the upper class.

In another unique representation nature symbolizes an escape from the pressures of society. Both Clarissa and Sally find “sanctuaries of peace” in gardens and flowers. Clarissa finds a respite from society’s demands in the flowers of Miss Pym’s shop (Thakur 66). Sally “often went into her garden and got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her” (Woolf, *MD* 192-3). Sadly, this is the only temporary and unreliable way that these women know to find “peace and purity”<sup>4</sup> (Thakur 67).

One of Septimus’ aphorisms, which also supports the representation of escape through nature, is in part, “Men must not cut down trees” (Woolf, *MD* 24). By contrast, the Prime Minister’s car displays a “tree pattern on the blinds” (15). This tree on the blinds demonstrates nature subjugated to the convenience of the upper class; the tree serves as a barrier to the outside rabble. When this car backfires, Septimus thinks that he is “rooted to the pavement;” he is a tree “blocking the way” (15). This psychotic episode reiterates Septimus’ symbolic need for solace from the heat of the imperialistic society, which cuts him down during the years of his life that ought to be the most productive.

Again using nature symbolically, Woolf rails against “all oppressive social systems” that seek to destroy the balance of nature (Kostkowska 189). Justyna Kostkowska also reveals that

Woolf symbolizes the “social oppression of everything natural” (190) in this novel through “unnatural restrictions and regulations on life” (185). “Container gardening” (Kostkowska 190) reveals such a connective oppression when Lucrezia sees “half alive...people...looking at a few ugly flowers stuck in pots” (Woolf, *MD* 23). Even the women in the streets of London contain this symbol of social restriction, for their lips appear as “roses blooming under glass” (71). Septimus feels flattened on the wallpaper with the roses, and in Regent’s Park, his body becomes the container, for the flowers grow through his flesh (139). The flowers contained in pots, lips, and walls mimic the people suffering from convenient confinement within a lower class by the ruling upper class.

Woolf not only expanded the symbols of nature; she also created “simultaneous connections” through these symbols (Lee 93). Fleishman notes a “shared system of symbols” in exiting a window and finding solace in a garden (81). At the beginning of the day, when Clarissa “burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air...looking at flowers, at the trees...and the rooks,” (Woolf, *MD* 3) she escapes into things natural. (This is similar to Clarissa’s aforementioned respite in Miss Pym’s flower shop.) Later, when Septimus “flung himself vigorously...down” from the window into Mrs. Filmer’s garden, he escapes the social goddesses of proportion and conversion (149-50). In the final parallel symbol, after Lucrezia drinks Dr. Holmes’ potion, “it seemed to her...that she was opening long windows, [and] stepping out into some garden” (150). Lucrezia is escaping the pain of widowhood, brought about by Sir William’s imposition of his allegiance to his social goddesses on his patients and their families. Thus, these three characters find a representative escape in nature. Clarissa finds occasional respite from the rigors of social conformity in nature. Lucrezia steps into a garden of

respite (and dons a symbolically protective hat as she runs through cornfields) in her drug-induced dream. Sadly though, Septimus's escape into a garden is his demise.

Another expanded and shared symbol is the color grey.<sup>5</sup> Grey provides a symbolic picture of the "lack of warmth and colour of feeling" found in Sir William Bradshaw, the figurehead of hegemony in this novel. Bradshaw drives a "low, powerful, grey...motor car" (94). To "match its sober suavity, grey furs, [and] silver grey rugs were heaped in it" (94). The greyness is even a part of him, for crowned with his "grey hairs," (95) Sir William deposes and dispossesses the infirm in his "grey room" and "fosters a life defying conformity" (101). He "secluded her [England's] lunatics (14)...penalised despair, and made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared [a] sense of proportion" (99). The greyness symbolizes Sir William's, and thus high society's demand to conform and attendant "insensitivity to human suffering" (Thakur 60).

The "dove grey upholstery" in "the Proime Minister's kyar" (Woolf, *MD* 14) creates another parallel colour symbol which embodies the conspiracy of those with social power such as Sir William, and the British Monarchy "to keep any kind of vividness, any intense life, at a safe distance" (Zwerdling 125). Banding together, they keep the socially rebellious in their place of subservience. Through collusive conversion to greyness they press their victims into "puppets of the status quo...[and] a life-denying conformity" (Transue 96-7).

Opposing the conformity of grey, Clarissa "stages her social triumph dressed in green, as a Flora figure" (Fleishman 91). Paralleling Septimus' creed concerning conservation of trees, her evening gown represents damage to greenery and thus to people for her dress had been torn; some social elite at the Embassy party "had trod on the skirt" (Woolf, *MD* 37). Plunging deeper into the symbolism of green, Clarissa demonstrates her fear of expulsion from high society. As

she “collected the green folds together” (39) she also “dr[ew] her parts together” (Thakur 69). Thakur explains that Clarissa feels she must hide her “faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions—the tear in her personality” from the dicing and slicing of the upper class (69). One had to cover such faults to remain “the perfect hostess” (Woolf, *MD* 7). Nevertheless, her green evening dress that was appropriate at Buckingham Palace “lost its colour now in the sun” (37). Clarissa is playing a part forced by society (Thakur 69-70). She is a casualty of hegemony.

In addition to the many small symbols such as hats, clothing, nature, and color, Woolf, in broad brush strokes, painted a large symbol across this novel. The social upper class and the chief political figures, such as Queen, Prince, and Prime Minister, “the majesty of England,” (Woolf, *MD* 16) were at this point in British history inextricable. Peter Walsh decries this fact of the upper class’ “control over English society” (Zwerdling 120) by naming it the “governing class” (Woolf, *MD* 76). To represent this ruling class, Woolf employed clocks, including Big Ben as a large symbol, which embodied both the rule of the upper class and the political rule. Therefore, in an alliance with “the William Bradshaws of the world, Big Ben [chiming throughout London and the novel] subjugates even the most recalcitrant subjects to the social order” (Minow-Pinkney 82).

Woolf, in addition to employing representative and connective symbolism, employed a city, London, as the scene to portray the workings of hegemony. The setting in the progressive city of London highlighted the popular philosophy that man is not “made in the image and likeness of God” but rather is “the descendant of an ape” (Quinn 200). This worldview created not only a “determination to dispense with the past” but also an inner-city intellectual crisis that incited a desperate “turn toward the inner self” (Quinn 200). A greater interest in personal freedom and thus in the ability to shape one’s own destiny arose within society. Modern



individuals would no longer acquiesce to a role designated by the social order. Scrope Purvis, Clarissa's neighbor, envisions her in exactly this way. She has "a touch of the bird about her" which negates the vision of her in the same paragraph as "very upright" (Woolf, *MD* 4). Through these conflicting images, Woolf suggests Clarissa's inner desire to soar above her social confinement. Although Clarissa "remains loyally aristocratic, the reader is invited to other perspectives" (Ruotolo 99). Thus, early in the novel, Woolf displayed her hope that she was foretelling the coming demise of the social status quo in Great Britain.

London also served well as the locus of the social conflict in Dalloway for it was the seat of government. During that time in its history, Great Britain's political leaders embodied not only the social aristocracy, but also the ruling political order. This city setting placed Woolf's characters in close proximity to such imposing landmarks as the Royal Palace and Parliament, which housed the consistently intruding Big Ben, and provided easy access for her characters to a place where the masses gathered in close proximity, Regent's Park. A logical backdrop was thus established for Woolf to expose and intensify the conflict of the upper and lower class groups. The setting in London also accelerated and exacerbated the inner- and inter-character conflicts in upper and lower class groups, strengthening Woolf's case against hegemony.

The work's climax at the party satirically amalgamates the antithetical motifs of death and a social gathering. These motifs are embodied in Septimus and Clarissa who otherwise are "social worlds apart" (Novak 106). Without visible connections they "come nearer and nearer" (Novak 113). Clarissa as a "mistress of silver, of linen, of china" (Woolf, *MD* 38) embraces high society. Septimus is "a rebel against society" (Thakur 63). Although there is a "gross disparity in social acceptability" between Clarissa's party and Septimus' suicide, both characters have an

“abiding bitterness about social life,” and they display a parallel intention (Fleishman 87). Both Clarissa and Septimus sacrificed themselves on the altar of social ritual.

Pushing her dressing-down of hegemony further, Woolf lampooned the “perfect hostess” through two characters (Lee 103-4). When Clarissa entered her home with her parasol, her servant “handled it like a sacred weapon which a Goddess, having acquitted herself honourably in the field of battle, sheds, and placed it in the umbrella stand” (Woolf, *MD* 30). The venerable Lady Bruton has floated on the “grey tide of service” (108) for so long that her mind has become “tangles” (110); she must rely on “the admirable Hugh” (5) to write a letter. Through satire, Woolf demonstrated her “fascinated dislike of the world of society hostesses” (Lee 94).

Therefore, the final party scene combines setting and symbolism to embody a satirical wake (Zwerdling 122). Ladies are “wrapped like mummies” (Woolf, *MD* 164). Miss Parry not only “walked slowly with a stick” but was “placed in a chair” and people were “led up to her”(178). Due to her glass eye Peter opined that she was turning to glass; he saw her as “stone-white” (162). The young people “solidify young” (178). “Solidity, rigidity, [and] stasis” in Mrs. Dalloway portray the governing class as “incapable of reacting appropriately to the critical events of their time” (Zwerdling 122). Even “when the Prime Minister [this symbol of ‘English society’] arrived, he looked ‘so ordinary...all rigged up in gold lace” (Zwerdling 122; Woolf, *MD* 172). This ruling class has become ridiculously impotent; its days are surely numbered.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf effectively “deliver[ed] her diatribe” against the “governing class spirit” (Thakur 55; Woolf, *MD* 76). The novel’s characters did not obtain freedom, peace, or joy. Septimus, the “Lord who had come to renew society” was sacrificed with no resurrection (Woolf, *MD* 25). His death was in vain; those he left behind still had no escape from fear, and no salvation.<sup>6</sup> Hegemony was the culprit.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster, an acquaintance of Virginia Woolf and part of the Bloomsbury Group, in his book entitled Virginia Woolf stated, “improving the world she would not consider” (qtd. in Zwerdling 120).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Guiguet in Virginia Woolf and her Works states, “the mechanical relations between individuals, such as are imposed by the social structure, dominated by concepts of class and weath...are not her problem” (qtd. in Zwerdling 120).

<sup>3</sup> During this time period, the British Empire consisted of colonies in each time zone. Dr. Kelly L. Ross feels that the time zones themselves are “artifacts” of the empire. He obtained the original idea for his illustration (shown in Appendix A, following these notes) from a less ornate representation on page 246 of the Atlas of the British Empire, edited by C. A. Bayly, published in New York by Facts on File Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1989.

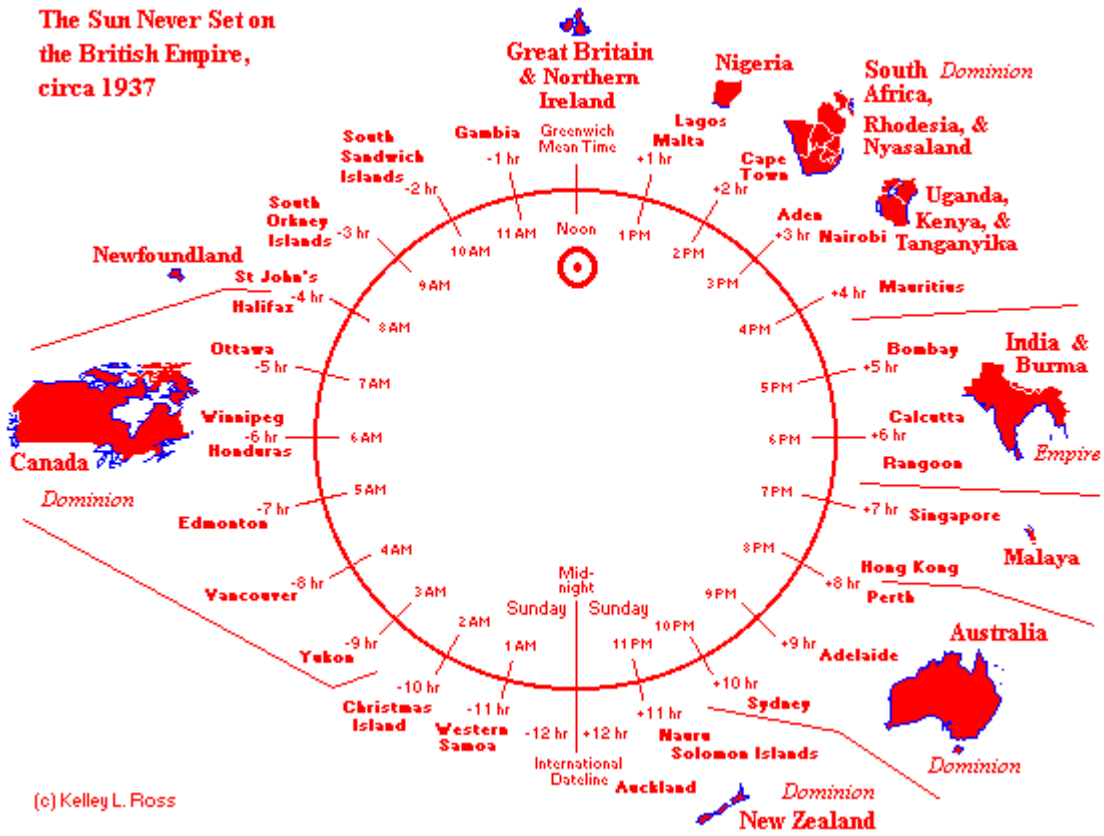
<sup>4</sup> Holy Scripture reveals that “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (Isa. 40:8 NASB).

<sup>5</sup> To maintain unity and veracity, the words grey, colour, and honourably reflect the British spelling.

<sup>6</sup> Compare to the Lord Jesus’ words: “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev. 1:17b-18 NASB).

Appendix A

The Sun Never Set on the British Empire, circa 1937



(c) Kelley L. Ross

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