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The Relationship Between Public and Private Selves and Spaces in

Mrs Dalloway and *The Night Watch*

Clarissa Dalloway of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Helen Giniver of Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* both identify with private and public selves; in their public sphere, they adhere to societal standards, but in private, they hold desires that disagree with how they identify publicly. Clarissa is a socialite married to Conservative politician Richard Dalloway in a post-World War I London, whose brief love affair with Sally Seton captivates her inner thoughts years later; Helen is a closeted lesbian during and after World War II in a secret relationship with Julia. As the women navigate their lives in private and public spaces, a tension between their private and public selves becomes apparent. While Clarissa and Helen's private desires can exist in private spaces, they cannot prosper through the context of their public identities, and as a result, absences within both women are bred.

Throughout *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa is confronted with a tension between her internal sexual desires centered around her brief romance with Sally and the reality of her romantic life with Richard. This tension is encouraged by her simultaneous appreciation and resentment towards her conventional, heteronormative marriage. At the same time, this disagreement between Clarissa's inner desires and outer realities makes for an absence within herself.

Throughout the novel, this absence is brought to Clarissa's attention by the spaces, both physical and mental, that she enters. In a moment where Clarissa enters her attic room, the narrator says,

She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold

contact of man and woman, or of women all together. For *that* she could dimly perceive.

(Woolf 24)

Christina Stevenson, author of ““Here was one room, there another”: the Room, Authorship, and Reminine Desire In *A Room of One’s Own and Mrs Dalloway*,” believes that in this moment, Clarissa “comes to confront her own inadequacy” (Stevenson). When Clarissa is met with a private space, such as her attic bedroom in her and Richard’s home, her inner truths come to the forefront of her thoughts. Her sexual desires for women - the “central something” - is the “warm” force that presents itself repeatedly in her cold, romantically-lacking world. As an attempt to overcome, or rather repress, these desires, Clarissa relies on her public identity - the sociable, party-throwing wife of a politician. She does this as a means of “covering over a frigidity or inability to feel sexual warmth,” Stevenson said. Stevenson goes on to suggest that Clarissa is a parallel of the room: “she is merely a room, a surface without interiority. Entering into her bedroom, the reader witnesses not the dominance of a self-present ego but something missing” (Stevenson). Clarissa acknowledges that her inner sexual desires are a reason for an absence within herself; but because her attraction to women is a force that steers her inner self but not her outer self, she does not act on these desires. Clarissa “undoubtedly then felt what men felt” but only for a “moment” (24). This moment serves as “an illumination; a match burning in a crucus; an inner meaning almost expressed” but ended quickly as she was interrupted by Richard coming into their home, making her private space a shared, public one (24). As Richard’s presence pierces her private bubble, she abandons her inner desires and reverts to the identity of her outer self.

Clarissa's inner lesbian desires are dominated by her nostalgia and romanticization surrounding Sally Seton, therefore Sally attributes to Clarissa's absence. Clarissa looks back on her time with Sally, quoting Shakespeare's *Othello*: "If I were now to die 'twere now to be most happy"(26). She found that her kiss with Sally was the "most exquisite moment of her whole life" and 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" (27). Clarissa's youth with Sally represented a time in Clarissa's life when her private and public selves were most aligned. She could engage in her private lesbian desires - even if only once - in a public context. At the same time, when Clarissa looks back on her youth, she does so with an air of condescension. She describes her younger self as being "completely reckless" and doing "the most idiotic things out of bravado"(26); and the metaphor about her sexuality being a "diamond" that she must not engage with shows that, even then, she suppressed and diminished her inner desires. Clarissa also diminished her inner desires by relying on a quote about a heterosexual relationship in *Othello* to express her lesbian desire for Sally, as Anna Snaith, author of "Virginia Woolf's Narrative Strategies: Negotiating Between Public and Private Voices," suggests. She must describe her lesbian feelings through a heteronormative lens. Snaith writes, "As *Othello* teaches us, love between a man and a woman is passionate, violent, and eventually lethal to the woman." She continues: "'Love' thus fails Clarissa, who is unable to picture her desire for Sally except as something destructive to woman." Clarissa frames her desire for Sally in this light because it does not agree with the public identity she has created for herself or the public spaces in which she lives. However, Clarissa's memories of Sally, and her inner lesbian desires, infiltrate the

moments where she is alone with her thoughts. These moments are the private spaces in which Clarissa's private self can be engaged.

Although there are distinct discrepancies between Clarissa's private and public selves, and the subsequent spaces in which these selves come to life, her selves still infringe upon one another. Snaith writes, "the public is intimately linked to the private [in *Mrs Dalloway*]; the external is rendered at the moment when it becomes internal (...) There is a continuous dialectic between inner and outer" (Snaith). Sally, who is mostly a character of Clarissa's private self and inner desires, inserts herself in Clarissa's public world by showing up to the party. Woolf writes, "[Sally and Clarissa] 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," (124). In this scene, there is a juxtaposition between Sally from Clarissa's private world, and all the aspects of her public world: the friends at her party in the home she owns with Richard, the flowers he got her to express his love. Clarissa facing her private world in a public setting mirrors that of her viewing her kiss with Sally through a heterosexual fantasy: there is a sense of diminishment to the inner self. Clarissa's romanticized memory of Sally is replaced with Sally's new public identity, which, like Clarissa's, is one of convention. She had "married, quite unexpectedly, a bald man with a large buttonhole who owned, it was said, cotton mills at Manchester. And she had five boys!" (132). The mingling of Clarissa's public identity and private identity brings her sense of absence to the surface once more, as Sally, who once fueled her private desires, shifts into Clarissa's public world.

Similarly to Clarissa, Helen's public world disagrees with her private desires as she navigates being a lesbian in an unaccepting society. For both women, societal forces cause a deviation between their public and private selves, resulting in an absence of self. Although Helen acts on her sexual desires through her relationship with Julia, they must be concealed in public spaces: she cannot kiss Julia openly or tell her coworker, Viv, about her relationship. In a moment where Helen is inclined to tell Viv about Julia, Helen thinks: "How easy it was (...) for men and women. They could stand in a street and argue, flirt - they could kiss, make love, do anything at all - and the world indulged them." (Waters 121). Helen yearns to express her private relationship and love with Julia in her public world, but because she cannot do so, there is an element of unfulfillment that feeds into her absence of self. Her inability to speak to Viv about her "L business," as Julia would call it, also creates a sense of detachment - from Viv and from herself (274).

In another scene, Helen and Julia are in Regent's Park together. Outwardly, they appear as friends although privately they are lovers. When Julia's friend Ursula shows up, Helen finds herself jealous of the two. Because she has nothing concrete to anchor her and Julia's relationship in a public space, she feels "shattered."

Ten minutes before she had been lying just like this, enjoying the familiar, secret nearness of Julia's limbs. She'd wanted to hold onto that moment, make a crystal bead of it. Now the bead felt shattered. For what was Julia to her, after all? She couldn't lean to her and kiss her. What could she do, to say to the world that Julia was hers? What did she have, to keep Julia faithful? She had only herself. (60)

Waters emphasizes the secret nature of Helen and Julia's relationship to reiterate that their private selves cannot exist in a public setting. Their love being like "a crystal bead" mirrors Clarissa's understanding of her love for Sally as a wrapped up "diamond" she must not look at - both women acknowledge their inner desires as something precious but they also understand that they cannot act upon these desires in their public lives and public spaces in which they surround themselves.

Another parallel between Helen and Clarissa is when, in 1944, Helen and Julia share a kiss in the darkness of the blackout in London. Although Helen and Julia are technically in a public space, the darkness of the blackout makes it so they are in a private space. Their inner desires are facilitated by the darkness. Their physical invisibility alludes to the concealment of their private selves. Helen knows that, "all she had to do was move her head - just turn it, just tilt it, that was all - for her lips to find out Julia's in the darkness" (374). Their kiss, which is the materialization of their lesbianism, is only possible in "the darkness," or in their private worlds. Because Helen's public and private selves are at odds, she lacks a sense of wholeness, like Clarissa. The reality of Helen's two selves leads her into a spiraling episode of jealousy at the end of the first part of the novel, where she turns to self harm as a way of bringing her private relationship with Julia into her public world through a cut on her thigh.

The private and public identities and spaces of Helen and Clarissa are not separated by neat, definite boxes - they mingle, they are messy, they are nuanced. For Clarissa, the disagreement between her private and public self has left her being unsatisfied by both selves. For Helen, her inability to break the threshold between private and public has left her incomplete. Clarissa and Helen struggle to exist in both the private and public realm while also

maintaining a respect for themselves and from their society. Because they cannot simultaneously satisfy their private and public selves, they experience a void within themselves. While both women acknowledge the differing facets of their identities, they ironically seem to think such an experience - having private desires and a public life - is individual to them. They fail to understand the nuances of those around them, and despite their enlightened perspectives on the private and public self, they make definite judgements of their peers without a consideration of the private self. Clarissa thinks of Richard as someone with “divine simplicity,” when he actually experiences a turbulence between his inner desires and public self in regards to expressing his love to Clarissa (Woolf 88). Clarissa also judges Sally only by her physical appearance and circumstances - she was “older, happier, less lovely” - without considering that Sally might experience Clarissa’s same cognitive dissonance over private desires and public identity (124). Helen envies Viv for the simplicities of heterosexuality, yet Helen does not realize Viv is engaged in her own private relationship that she cannot express in her public world. Clarissa and Helen’s inability to recognize that the public and private are components of all people contributes to their loneliness and encourages their permeating sense of absence.

Sources

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