

Sample Research Essay

Gendered Voices in *Mrs. Dalloway*: Powerful Meaning

An insightful discussion of feminine and masculine voices is embedded within Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Noticing how and when feminine and masculine voices are present is useful when thinking about what this novel *does*—how it functions to criticize or agree with aspects of British culture during this time. Female and male voices are portrayed in a myriad of ways: through dialogue, metaphors, symbolism, and narration. Therefore, careful inspection of the word choice, style, and figurative language used in this text is necessary to understand the layered complexity of gendered voices within *Mrs. Dalloway*. Notably, the theme of water-imagery and the backdrop of urbanization both serve to illuminate the way voices exist, thus providing a rich focal point for this topic. By considering how specific language and metaphors appear in *Mrs. Dalloway*, especially with respect to urbanization and water, we come to understand how voices are used to demonstrate the power dynamic between men, woman, and the male-dominated London.

In order to truly understand the significance of masculine and feminine voices within *Mrs. Dalloway*, we must not only look at the dialogue, but also at the deeper, subtler, expressions of voices. In its simplest form, “voice” describes what you hear when someone says something aloud. However, because voices do not always accurately reflect feeling as feelings do not always reflect the broader social landscape, we cannot always take them for what they are. For instance, what one says is not necessarily telling of what one truly feels, for feelings cannot always be realized into vocalization. Similarly, the feelings of one person cannot be extended to incorporate the broader social feelings of that time without accruing some amount of uncertainty. This means that we must expand the simple definition of “voices,” which lacks nuance and

insight, in order to build a *real*, complete, picture of how masculine and feminine voices live within this novel. For the purpose of this essay, the word “voices” must be treated in an encompassing sense, such that it includes internal, unspoken voices, metaphorical voices, as well as the simple voices of dialogue.

The abundant use of water-imagery in *Mrs. Dalloway* can be related to feminine presence and power in the city, which is communicated through the language and metaphorical descriptions. In one particular passage, water-imagery is used to depict an old woman singing across from the Regent Park Tube station. It describes the woman as a bubbling spring, and her voice, her song, as water flowing across the city, “fertilizing, leaving a damp stain” (81). In her essay “Difference and Continuity: The Voices of Mrs. Dalloway,” Johanna Garvey engages with this passage, saying that this imagery is highly representative of “female creativity” (63). Looking at the specific words used in this passage helps us reaffirm this claim. The word “fertile” or “fertilizing”, which is very closely linked to reproduction and womanhood, repeatedly shows up in this passage. Furthermore, the idea of a flood is also associated with rebirth because a flood replenishes land. In this way, it is obvious that this water, this great flood of song, is being related to femininity. Together, this theme of fertilization and the metaphor of a flood strongly suggest that this old woman is symbolic of women’s presence, women’s voices, spilling out into the public realm.

Different characters’ impressions of this woman show how this feminine reclaiming of the city is received by the people of London. Specifically, it is telling to observe the male perceptions of the voice of this “modern” woman. Garvey acknowledges how Peter’s inability to see any power or grace in this old woman is demonstrated by how he hears her voice as “weak” and “shrill” (63). These words are often associated with powerlessness and are almost never used

to describe men. In this way, Peter is assigning negative and gendered adjectives to this old woman, which demonstrates how he sees her as simply a “frail quivering sound” (80). In addition, Garvey notes that Peter’s perception of her voice as “absent of all human meaning” is significant in the sense that, here, human meaning signifies *male* meaning (80). That is to say, Peter fails to see any meaning that is not directly related to male experience and thinks of this woman as only an interruption of his thoughts. Conversely, Rezia upon hearing the old woman’s voice regards it as an “invincible thread of sound [that] wound up into the air” (83). She feels the power of the fertilizing waters and it calms her profoundly: “[she was] quite suddenly sure that everything was going to be alright” (83). This exemplifies how Rezia, a female, hears a future in the old woman’s voice, whereas Peter, a male, hears nothing but the pathetic song of an old beggar woman.

Furthering this connection between feminine voices and the old woman, we can look at how the flood resembles the actual voices, the opinions, of men and women of this time. Despite Garvey’s critical observations of this passage, she does not recognize the powerful symbolism of this old woman—representative of female’s rising presence in public spaces—asking for spare *change*. Her asking for *change* could certainly be symbolic of women’s demand to claim space within the public realm of London, only five years after women won the right to vote. This old woman’s voice is a depiction of feminine power flooding the streets of London, making “mould” out of this male-dominated space, interrupting and drowning out Peter’s thoughts—masculine voices— and thus washing away the strictly patriarchal system from which London rises. This powerful imagery of an old woman, described with the semiotic language of water, says much about the interactions between feminine and masculine voices in the context of a city. Perhaps, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Miss Kilman is not quite correct when she tells Elizabeth that “Every profession

is open to the women of your generation” (136); however, she is right about the growing presence of women in the public sphere: this passage serves to illuminate how the introduction of feminine power within the city is received both consciously and subconsciously by female and male persons.

Another insightful interplay between feminine and masculine voices appears in the scene where Clarissa calls after Peter to remind him of her party. In this passage, Clarissa’s voice is said to “sound frail and thin and very far away as Peter Walsh shut the door” (48). Clarissa’s voice is depicted as having to struggle in order to cut through the noise of the city, the traffic and the bells. This timid interaction between a woman and the city is ironically contrasted in her, Clarissa’s, powerful impression on Peter. Peter is struck by “Clarissa’s voice saying, Remember my party, Remember my party,” and is tormented as her voice “sang in his ears” (59). The structure of this scene emphasizes this irony. Peter’s observation of Clarissa’s “frail and thin” voice is followed by a page break, which represents time passing (48). The next paragraph starts with Peter thinking of Clarissa’s voice. Many pages later, this same phrase reappears as Peter is unable to forget her voice. It seems as though Clarissa is shrunken by the city, a traditionally masculine defined space, yet her influence on the men that dominate this space is immense indeed. It can be said that “In nineteenth-century Britain, the notion of home (feminine) and away (masculine) became ‘widespread’” (Santaulària 93), however, this scene shows how women do, in fact, influence the public realm simply in less direct ways.

By drawing a parallel between Sara Ahmed’s idea of conditional happiness and the flow of power between men and the city and men and woman we can start to unravel this intricately intertwined power dynamic. In The Promise of Happiness, a chapter from Ahmed’s essay “Feminist Killjoys,” she describes in great detail the idea of conditional happiness, where one’s

happiness is attached not to the object of happiness itself, but to the person who gains happiness from that object. This situation of “fellow-feeling” can be explained with a simple example. Take some person, R, who hates dogs but has a best friend, person Z, who adores dogs. In this case, person Z gains happiness from the dog, whereas person R archives happiness from seeing her friend happy. This means that person R’s happiness is dependent upon person Z’s happiness, which is dependent upon the object of happiness—the dog. Now, this is a very positive example of conditional happiness with negligible consequences. However, Ahmed argues that this sort of dependence has great consequences. She claims that conditional happiness “require[s] that I take up what makes you happy *as* what makes me happy, which may involve compromising my own idea of happiness,” thus posing a great sacrifice to the person who is realigning their happiness to fit another’s (57).

Connecting this idea back to *Mrs. Dalloway*, we can see that the only way women are shown to have power is through their power over men. Women are described as being overwhelmed by the city, and thus powerless in its presence. We see this not only with Clarissa, but also with Elizabeth as she is “shyly” and on “tiptoe” explores the city on her own (154). Despite being portrayed as small and meek in the large cityscape, women are also depicted as having some type of control over men as displayed in Clarissa’s strong hold over Peter. Men are assimilated to the city, the very expression of this patriarchal culture, yet are shown to be controlled to a large extent by women: Peter thought it was “quite ridiculous how easily some girl without a grain of sense could twist him round her finger” (176). We can see here a sort of conditional power where men are the ones whose power is related to the direct object, the city, and the women’s power is dependent on men. This, perhaps, says something about the “voices”

of the feminine and masculine in terms of how they relate to volume, which is analogous to power.

To untangle completely the great intricacy with which Woolf writes about voices in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is beyond the scope of this essay. Woolf leaves much to be interpreted and pondered by the reader, as her writing displays connections that run into one another to produce the exquisitely complex, at times frustratingly fluid, but honest, text of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The purpose of this essay is to speak to that complexity and to evolve some of the imagery and language as to suggest one meaning where there is certainly many more. Overall, through the consideration of the words, metaphors, and style of this text, we come to appreciate the depth of voices displayed within *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as see the ironies that exist between the portrayal of gendered voices. We realize that woman's voices are depicted as frail against the city of London, the entirety of male patriarchy; however, we also see how woman's voices are voluminous to the individual man. This then leads us to the idea of conditional power and the tendency for woman to assume this position in relation to the object of power. Furthermore, through analysis, we discover that there is a subtle revolution persisting in this novel as women advocate for space in the public sphere and indeed begin to challenge the patriarchal system which constrains them to conditional power. Overall, within *Mrs. Dalloway* lives a complex mixing of voices, some louder than others, which come together to tell us about how male and female presence exists in London.

Work Cited

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