

PORTRAYAL OF SOCIETY THROUGH SYMBOLISM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS DALLOWAY

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Abstract:

The paper is about the portrayal of society through symbolism in Virginia Woolf's .The use of symbols is common in works of art, especially in poetry. Let us be very clear about one thing: Symbolism is not merely a literary flourish. It is a very potent, effective and significant weapon in the hands of an artist. This technique, Symbolism, helps the artist in conveying his meaning as the message. It helps in creating the right type of atmosphere in which the artist establishes a rapport with his audience, and this is significant for his art. With the help of symbols, the artist conveys his ideas, views, comments, meaning, message etc, at various levels and in different shades. The associations of symbols are especially significant.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, symbolism, Septimus, Mrs. Dalloway, night, day

Virginia Woolf, the most prominent woman-writer of the twentieth century, who was an admirable novelist, story-writer and literary critic, also found this technique of employing symbols to present the inner world of perceptions. She strove to relate it to a deeper philosophic purpose. But in spite of the scrupulous artistic integrity with which the theme is treated, it is hard to escape the feeling that both the reader and author have been frustrated. The significant image, which should contain the mystery of existence, has not been found. In *To The Lighthouse*, the Lighthouse is the symbol which emerges out of the sea; out of life, out of time and is eternal. To reach that eternity, Mr. Ramsey must leave the "island" which is symbolic of the isolated self and of the reluctance to yield to the sea and become part of it.

There are various kinds of symbols employed by Virginia Woolf. These include Nature, Night and Day, Tree, Birds, Butterflies, Fishes, Waves, Water, Air, Characters etc. In Nature symbols, the cycle of seasons represents the process of becoming and Virginia Woolf's concept of Time. The seasons of the year, the different times of day take on the substance and meaning which pervade her novels. Autumn represents the period of respite and blossoming, of the suspension of the course of things and of lives, of the holiday season of the soul. Winter represents the immobility and silence of the hard earth swept by icy blasts, the night of the year, the season when life driven from outside shrinks within itself; withdrawal in the face of external threats, a forecast of death. It is the season of hopeless disillusionment. Summer has spring and autumn on either end and these are periods of turbulence: wind, rain, bud-bursting, dead leaves drifting, clouds and birds flying, the sky and temperature both unstable- the seasons of change, heavy with hope or with nostalgia. There are moments of passage and lack serenity. These are hostile seasons.

Night and Day represent the different pairs of balanced forces, the image of the mind's constant rhythmical alternation between darkness and light. Day has a light which lends shape and color to objects. It is the creative presence of the universe, reborn at every dawn. It represents life's richness and splendor. But the multiplicity and the dazzlement of the day represent disorder and confusion. Night obliterates colors and forms, and the whole of the visible world. It leaves us alone. It restores our integrity and self-control, the power of comprehension of the visible which sight conceals from us. Trees, leaves, Roots, Forests, etc are also employed as symbols. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is beauty and strength of creation, standing firm against all assaults. The trees are like the foam of life on the surface of the earth, surviving the eternal flux. They are the first to catch the light, and from them rises the song of joy of the birds. Virginia Woolf also uses Birds, Butterflies, and Fishes as symbols in her novels. They are a primordial aspect of reality, like the sudden emergence of truth. They represent inevitability. The splash of fish in water is symbolic of the exploration of the inner consciousness. Their symbolic value and significance are enhanced, enriched and completed by their participation into elements.

The Waves awake echoes beyond the shores on which they break. The waves represent the alternation of lifting up and dropping in life. They represent the movement of life carrying us towards the shore irresistibly, but on the whole beneficently. The waves represent an aesthetic initiation of a rare order. The waves are the waves of experience breaking over individuals. The images borrowed from the realm of Water suggest a profound intimacy, a harmony between nature and water. Air is complementary to water in the representation of the universe. Stir in the air is the agitation of life. Air is the unpredictable animator that provokes the play of emotions on the face of the earth. The Earth represents the stubbornness, the obstacle against which consciousness stumbles.

The characters of her novels also have a symbolic significance and represent different aspects of contemporary western civilization. In Mrs. Dalloway, the Dalloways (Clarissa, Richard, and Elizabeth) represent the external glitter, the pomp, and show, shallowness, hollowness, and superficiality of modern civilization which to all appearances is peaceful and comfortable, refined and polished. Hypocrisy and insincerity are the hallmarks of Clarissa's conduct. Her longing for her attic-room is her need for spiritual privacy in a world of spiritual hollowness, inner discontent and emptiness of life. Septimus Warren Smith is her double and concretizes her spiritual emptiness. He represents the severe indictment of contemporary civilization which causes neurosis, nervous breakdown and insanity with its tensions, failures, and disillusionment. Certain actions are also symbolic of a character's temperament or state of mind at a particular moment. Hugh Whitbread represents the most detestable in English middle-class life, who has read nothing, thought nothing and felt nothing. He is symbolic of mental servility of plumed authority. Miss Kilman represents possessive love and corrupt religiosity. Religion, to her, provides escape from her gnawing anger and hatred. Instead of being humble and sympathetic she is insensitive and sinister. Similarly, Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw symbolize the artificiality and hypocrisy rampant in the society. Their orderliness, neatness, and concern for the suffering humanity are pretexts to gain power over the helpless. They are insensitive to the misery. They are overbearing. The grey color- of a car, of hair, of fur, silver, rugs, and room- is symbolic of Bradshaw's insensitivity to human suffering. It also reflects the lack of warmth, feeling etc. Holmes and Bradshaw are odious to Septimus, Lucrezia, Clarissa, and Richard.

Peter Walsh, Sally Seton, and Septimus Warren Smith are symbolically employed to represent adventurous, the unconventional and visionary in the society. All these characters are such that they cannot fit into the erstwhile London society. It is for this reason that Peter Walsh escaped to India and is considered a failure by everybody including himself. Sally Seton went away to live in the countryside near Manchester and Septimus Warren Smith committed suicide lest he should be overpowered by the Holmes and Bradshaws.

Thus, we see that Virginia Woolf makes very effective use of various symbols including the characters, who have been employed symbolically. Through her characters like Peter Walsh

and Sally Seton, she conveys her criticism of society, its insensitivity, shallowness, and hypocrisy. Peter Walsh and Sally Seton are able to see through the refined and cultured and fashionable exterior of the society. Peter Walsh made a very correct assessment of Clarissa's snobbery, materialism, and worldly wisdom. She called her a "perfect hostess". Similarly, Sally Seton made a correct judgment and evaluation of Clarissa and people around her when she implored Peter Walsh to carry her off to save her from the Richards and Whitbread's. The visions and hallucinations of Septimus's Warren Smith were his awareness of the sins, brutalities, insensitivities of the society. He found himself helplessly trapped among the Bradshaw's. He is, in fact, martyred for knowing the truth and reality about society. Mrs. Dalloway is, therefore, Virginia Woolf's indictment and criticism of the erstwhile modern society.

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