

Death of the Soul, or Death of the Self?
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"I do not know if it has ever been noted before," writes the narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*, "that one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego." This description of life as inescapably disconnected and insular -- of the self as ultimately alone, locked away and hidden from others in the fear of revealing too much -- seems to perfectly describe the characters within Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and specifically the sort of guarded, lonely life chosen by Clarissa Dalloway herself. For Clarissa, the death of the soul (to borrow Peter Walsh's phrase) is perhaps preferable to the death of the self that may lie in wait outside her shell, despite whatever joys or truths may also be found there.

For Clarissa has indeed erected a shell around herself, leading a proper English, vaguely aristocratic life, detached from emotion, guarded from reality...and, ultimately, alone. As we read the novel, we realize (as Clarissa has undoubtedly always know, at least in some corner of her mind) that Clarissa's soul has in many ways been deadened, that she will not allow herself to honestly, unashamedly *feel* her emotions -- feel anything or speak with any degree of candor. Everything in Clarissa's life has become a matter of appearance, often for its own sake; no true Clarissa Dalloway is ever allowed free reign, and only a simulacrum ever appears in her public life.

And yet our compassion, our sympathies or pity, toward Clarissa can only extend so far, for she has chosen this life of her own accord. *She* has decided to forgo happiness for the promise of position, security and respectability within society. She has decided to transgress none of that society's norms (at least publicly), to suppress her own desires, however strong, and to build about her a facade. However miserable Clarissa may be -- and we may easily infer that she is quite miserable -- she has brought this sorrow, this numb ache of emptiness, upon herself, and done so willingly. "That she held herself well was true; and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well, considering that she spent little. But often now this body she wore...this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing -- nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway."

Clarissa has indeed given up on most everything which could mark her with the stigmata of individuality; the only sort of individuality even marginally admired within her circle is that of a man, Peter, who can exclaim aloud how he would much prefer Bartlett pears -- a quirk in personality which might provoke a bit of gossip but which still ultimately reveals nothing. Clarissa's life is the culmination of decades of inhibitions, dreams and fantasies denied, the acceptance of a safe, comfortable home with Richard rather than the intriguing, but dangerous possibility of happiness with Sally Seton. Clarissa must, perhaps, content herself with appearances -- with a party for a circle that includes not one true friend -- because this is all she has left.

And so she is left, then, with only "a perpetual sense...of being out, out, far out to sea and alone." In her attempts to conform to the expectations of society, to lead a sheltered, if rather dull, existence, Clarissa has become inscrutable to herself, unknowable; there is, indeed, no longer anything to know about her. "She knew nothing," Woolf writes, "no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed...she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that....Did it matter, then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?" All Clarissa has left, one might argue, is death...and her party.

What of the party, then? What of those moments to which the entire novel, Clarissa's entire day, appears to lead? Even there, in what she no doubt recognizes as her element, Clarissa remains, to somewhat

paraphrase Nabokov, separated from her surroundings. Among these dignitaries -- the Prime Minister, other refined and distinguished members of British society -- Clarissa Dalloway weaves in and out, masked, her true self (or whatever remains of it) hidden from, and untouched by, the swarm of guests. She is, as Peter Walsh notes, "at her worst -- effusive, insincere..." -- worried that her party might be ruined by talk of Septimus' death, of the real world outside her own cocoon-like existence and all its imperfections. She is, as Sally Seton remarks, "at heart a snob."

Clarissa has denied herself the chance at happiness, at a dangerous but honest life, and has traded for security and complacency -- the very things, coincidentally, that Kafka's K. seeks without success in *The Castle*. "No, the words meant absolutely nothing to her now," writes Woolf. "She could not even get an echo of her old emotion. But she could remember going cold with excitement..." Clarissa's one moment of true happiness arrives with the kiss of Sally Seton, yet for the rest of her life she attempts to deny this truth, to live her safe, guarded life of a narrow bed and memoirs at night and a party for people who are not her friends.

One could easily argue, however, that true happiness cannot be found within *or* without her protective shell, that if even she yielded to her whims and desires Clarissa might still remain miserable. Removed from the safe confines of life with Richard and high society, her misery might even grow. But, I believe Virginia Woolf would insist, Clarissa would actually be alive, her life sincere. Happiness cannot be found within her deadened little world of parties and snobbery and frigid marriage. The possibility that it can perhaps be found elsewhere is, Woolf seems to state, is worth the risk. Clarissa is correct when she "had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day." Death may come with divestment, with revealing yourself, in venturing into uncertainty. But the death of the self, terrifying as it may be, is far preferable than the death of the soul.