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# The Theme of Flowers in Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

## The Language of Flowers: Providing a Voice for the Voiceless

In Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, flowers tell the reader many things about Clarissa. She uses flowers as pawns in her artificial game of life. Clarissa gives flowers human features and develops human attachments to them because she has difficulty understanding people. In other words, her ideal life is created when she replaces the people in her life with the likenesses of flowers. When she finds human interaction to be too challenging, she relies on her flowers to provide her happiness and aid in expressing her feelings. The novel shows that she interacts with flowers and uses them to represent the people in her life that she may have trouble relating to. Having just made all these observations about Clarissa, it is crucial to note that these observations apply to the actual Virginia Woolf. She uses Clarissa to express emotions that she cannot express herself. Ultimately, Woolf insists that flowers provide a language for Clarissa to express her emotions and create her own ideal life while at the same time Clarissa is a pawn in Woolf's artificial life.

As readers, it is clear how important flowers are to the overall theme of the book by how early they appear in the novel. The first line reads, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (3). Right from the start, Clarissa makes it clear that she does not want or need anybody to get between her and her flowers. As this scene unfolds, we see Clarissa is on her way to the flower shop, where she will revel in the flowers she sees. The first thing she does is buy flowers; as she enters the flower shop, "There were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac; and carnations, masses of carnations [...]" (13). This quotation shows how fascinated she is with flowers and how each detail serves a purpose to her. Each type of flower is important for her to mention. After this moment, flowers continue to appear throughout the entire novel. Most importantly, they are an immense source of joy for Clarissa, who treasures the beauty of everyday life. Because of the joy that she has found and the association that Clarissa has formed with flowers, she uses them to fulfill her "purpose" in life. She knows that they could not survive without her; they would wither away. Clarissa finds joy in the fact that these flowers need her to survive, as the people in her life do.

Clarissa gives a personal quality to the flowers which further emphasizes how she relates them to her own life. She describes how Miss Pym looks in the flower shop: "turning her head from side to side among the irises and roses and nodding tufts of lilac with her eyes half closed...and dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale—as if it were the evening" (13). Clarissa observes

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how similar flowers are to humans through her use of personification. She describes Miss Pym's head turning "from side to side" while, at the same time, she describes "nodding tufts of lilac" and carnations "holding their heads up." Clarissa gives the flowers similar actions to Miss Pym by giving them human movement and body parts. Essentially, I am arguing that Clarissa views flowers as members of her life. She gives them actions and emotions as well as describing actual people in her life in terms of flowers. This demonstrates the extent to which she has difficulty understanding people.

Along the same lines, Clarissa recognizes how important each and every flower is in the larger scheme of life as the people in her life are. One such example is, "So wholly admirable, so splendid a flower to grow on the crest of human life, and yet he could not come up to the scratch" (159). Furthermore, she recognizes that a flower is a living thing that is fragile and unique. The "crest of human life" is how she describes the location of where flowers grow. I interpret this wording to mean that a flower is not that far off from being a human. Moreover, it is just on the brink of becoming a living, breathing human life. Clarissa makes a point to bring attention to how she views flowers. They are very close to being human, if not already there in her mind. She finds it wonderful how similar flowers are to the people in her life that she finds it hard to communicate with.

In addition, Clarissa notices how significant each moment can be: "[She] felt blessed and purified, saying to herself, as she took the pad with the telephone message on it, how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only)" (29). She notices how a simple daily task, such as taking a phone message, can be "a flower of darkness," which is to say it is deceptively beautiful in its own way. In addition, later in this thought she describes this happening as a "secret deposit of exquisite moments" (29). Clarissa has developed a skill to see things for more than they appear. This skill is very crucial to her development as a person because she needs it to be happy about her life and the way it is. She uses flowers to describe this normal activity as being extraordinary because she sees them as beautiful just the way they are. Clarissa recognizes how each flower, and each moment, can seem insignificant but are actually quite special.

Having just argued that flowers are important to Clarissa, let us now turn our attention to how another character recognizes her passion. One such example is, "But he wanted to come in holding something. Flowers? Yes, flowers, since he did not trust his taste in gold; any number of flowers, roses, orchids, to celebrate what was" (115). This quote is explaining how Richard wants to walk up to Clarissa holding flowers and say that he loves her. What is more important is that Richard knows that bringing the flowers with could make a big difference in Clarissa's reaction. The beauty of the roses seems to get his point across: "he was holding out flowers—roses, red and white roses. (But he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in

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so many words)” (118). Richard need say nothing because his gesture with the flowers speaks a thousand words: “She understood; she understood without his speaking; his Clarissa” (118). Their marriage, therefore, would be nothing without flowers. They provide a gateway for emotional communication between Clarissa and Richard that would not otherwise exist.

I have shown how Clarissa uses flowers to describe the beauty and fragility of the people in her life, but they can also be used to demonstrate how these people feel at their low points. Clarissa explains, “from a housemaid’s laughter—intangible things you couldn’t lay your hands on—that shift in the whole pyramidal accumulation which in his youth had seemed immovable. On top of them it had pressed; weighed them down, the women especially, like those flowers Clarissa’s Aunt Helena used to press between sheets of grey blotting-paper with Littré’s dictionary on top” (162). This quote is basically saying that Clarissa is being weighed down by the pressure to be young again. She uses flowers as a metaphor for life by saying the flowers are being squished in between these books at the same time that her youth is being trampled on. By elaboration, she is also being pressured from multiple angles as the flowers are being pressed “between sheets of grey blotting-paper.” Clarissa’s inability to hold youth in her hands is upsetting to her as she tries to compare it to the tangible object of flowers. This comparison helps Clarissa process her feelings and be able to understand things which she cannot touch.

Clarissa uses flowers as her escape. As an illustration, Clarissa is described as, “Despairing of human relationships (people were so difficult), she often went into her garden and got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her” (192). She replaces interactions with people with interactions with her flowers. Yet another way she humanizes flowers. At the same time, she gets something from flowers that people could never give. Clarissa can find peace in her flowers that, otherwise, she would never experience.

In summary, Clarissa makes sense of her life by using flowers to play the characters around her. I can bet that we all have something that we look to when we want to escape from our emotions; some people go shopping, read a book, paint, go driving, or sleep. Virginia Woolf writes as a way to escape her emotions and, in turn, creates Clarissa as another version of herself. Clarissa uses flowers to escape her emotions when they are too much for her to handle. They help her express her emotions, positive and negative, while still managing to bring her happiness. Clarissa finds flowers beautiful and ordinary, just the same as she sees the people in her life. Flowers provide her a language with which she communicates with others as well as gets closer to herself. Clarissa finds solace in flowers, as Virginia find peace in Clarissa.

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