# Virginia Woolf's muse

## In search of the real Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith

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The idea that Vita Sackville-West was the model for *Orlando* (1928) is well established, but who exactly inspired Woolf's other great work of fictional biography, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), remains uncertain. Hermione Lee has suggested that the novel's two subtly bridged characters, the hostess Clarissa and the shell-shocked Septimus, represent the two halves of Virginia split open like a Fabergé egg: Clarissa is the viable Woolf, out and about in London, and Septimus a vehicle for those periods in the writer's life that were compromised by mental illness.

In her diaries, Woolf describes drawing on her breakdowns to convey Septimus's torment, and tells us that doing so provoked serious "mental tremors". Yet she never aligns herself with the "material reality" that Lee tells us Clarissa was designed to represent. Rather, as her brother-in-law Clive Bell put it, she sought "to play the role of the tough, out at elbows Bohemian genius", "in contrast" to the upper-class ladies by whom she was surrounded.

In the year after the novel's publication, Woolf felt no attachment to her protagonist. Rather than grieving for Clarissa, as some authors do for their characters, she remained indifferent - even irritated by Clarissa's superficiality, describing her as "too tinselly", a phrase that surely signals that she did not see herself reflected in Clarissa. But Lee also speculates, a little confusingly, that Kitty Maxse, a socialite to whom Woolf was close in her youth, was another "original" for Mrs Dalloway, noting that the phrase "too tinselly" echoes Woolf's response to Kitty's death in 1922, when she fell over the banisters in her South Kensington home.

The idea that Kitty "was" Clarissa originates with Quentin Bell, Woolf's nephew, who first advanced the notion in his biography of his aunt. Yet in the same breath, he also acknowledged that those who knew Maxse well "did not see any close resemblance", and concluded: "Virginia comes closest to exact portraiture when she loves her model. She did not love Kitty".

An attempt to substantiate the Kitty thesis is made by David Taylor in his essay "Almost Kitty verbatim" (*TLS*, January 23, 2015). "Woolf's model for Mrs Dalloway was her childhood friend Kitty Maxse", he tells us. Taylor continues: "'Almost Kitty verbatim,' Virginia wrote to her sister Vanessa concerning Mrs Dalloway, 'what would happen if she guessed.'" But the letter he quotes was written on August 10, 1908, nearly twenty years before *Mrs Dalloway* was published, and what it actually says is: "Lettice is almost Kitty verbatim; what would happen if she guessed?". Lettice was a character cut from an early draft of Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*.

In a lecture that Woolf delivered at the University of Cambridge in May 1924, while she was writing *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf claimed that all novelists go through the same process when embarking on a novel. They come upon a muse, "some Brown, Smith, or Jones ... [who] says in the most seductive [...] way in the world, "Come and catch me if you can'". The bugle sounds, the hunt begins and the writer's life is consumed by the effort to put that personality on paper.

If we apply Woolf's statement to herself, then the Kitty supposition fails again. Because even if we think that Kitty's mysterious death influenced a thematic preoccupation with suicide in the novel, the question of who spurred the writer into action, years later, is left open.

Woolf began *Mrs Dalloway* as a series of short stories in June 1922. Yet she tells us in her diaries that she had cut Kitty from her life in 1908. Meaning that, at the point of inception, she hadn't seen Kitty in more than a decade. Nor is there, during the months of the novel's composition, any evidence in Woolf's diaries that she was reflecting on Kitty or taking an interest in her. Instead, three days before Woolf first mentions "Mrs Dalloway on Bond St" in her diaries, we find her noting that she has "put aside Mary [Hutchinson] to write about", and proceeds to do so. She is "an impulsive generous woman ... floored over by her society varnish."

Hutchinson, a figure on the periphery of the Bloomsbury Group, was introduced to Woolf by her cousin Lytton Strachey. Efforts to incorporate her more fully were made by Vanessa's husband, Clive Bell, during the period when he and Mary were having an affair (on and off from 1914 to 1927). Relations between Virginia and Mary were accordingly complex. Writing about one of Mary's first Bloomsbury appearances in October 1918, Duncan Grant recalled: "that idiot Virginia [said] ... we all despised and disliked Mary and only put up with her as a concubine of Clive's ...[Mary] of course burst into tears in the Café Royal and had to be taken home in a cab".

Yet Virginia also flirted with Mary: "Mary whose hand I took, held, & kissed, on the sofa ... she said she hated & feared me. I wooed her like a wayward child." Clive, for his part, told Mary that he felt "most uneasy about [Virginia]". He thought that "her main object will be to set us by the ears and I daresay she will succeed ." What follows in Woolf's diaries is lengthy descriptions of Mary and, from 1922, when Woolf records kissing her on the stairs, evidence that Clive's suspicions were well founded and that his sister-in-law's intentions had become increasingly amorous. By 1925, Mary had all but fallen for Woolf, drawn in by her frost-tipped love letters. "Mary says I'm the only woman she loves", Woolf noted, giving her the pet name "Weasel". "I like Weasels to kiss: but as they kiss to bite: and then to kiss. I like alternations and variety."

Beyond Bloomsbury, Mary was a high-society hostess and muse to Henri Matisse. Culture critics of the day described her as a "paragon of style," a leader of feminine taste in 1920s London. Dorothy Todd, the editor of *Vogue*, invited her to contribute to the magazine; under the pseudonym "Polly Flinders", Mary wrote columns that spoke of a yearning for sensual comforts and distraction in response to the repressions of the Victorian era. Woolf found them grating. Her opinion of Mary's writing reflected her wider censure of the society women with whom she refused to identify: "enameled... cheap bunch[es] of artificial cherries ... superb skimmer[s] of the surface ... [who] coat the mind with sugar & butter, make it slippery too."

If Woolf felt that Mary's prose skipped over the surface of things, something in it made a penny drop. For Mary's columns described the successful society lady as a "polychromatic rose" whose petals were scattered about drawing rooms, concert halls and tea parties. In reconfiguring those scattered petals, Mary describes "the number of butterflies we can [be]... the heaps of discarded coloured wings" (Polly Flinders, *Vogue*, 1924). Yet through the society woman's varnish, she also wrote of a pearl of private consciousness, one that remains intact, untouched by social display.

Given their flirtations, and this allusion to hidden personality, it's not hard to see how Mary might, in Woolf's imaginary, have been the one to whisper "Come and catch me if you can". Or how, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf takes aim at her target:

> Clarissa ... seeing in the glass ... the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party ... That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together ... into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point, a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives ... never showing a sign of all the other sides of her - faults, jealousies, vanities, suspicions. Now, where was her dress?

The passage embeds the studies of Mary from Woolf's diaries: "one of those impulsive, affectionate, rather unfortunately concocted natures who are to me interesting ... aspiring; fastidious, vain and so on." Yet it also evokes the "Polly Flinders" columns in its description of Clarissa's magpie-like need to gather herself, to collect her identity, which can be done only through the luxuries by which her personhood is externalized. Once this gathering is done, Clarissa transmutes, before the mirror, into the hostess, the sparkling diamond that reflects the onlooker, but deflects light away from the real Clarissa.

Before the mirror was where Woolf herself came undone. Her difficult relationship with her own

**Vanessa Redgrave as Clarissa in *Mrs Dalloway*, 1997**

**"Both Septimus and Eliot suffered a psychotic break as a result of losing a close male friend in the war"**

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appearance, her "complex" about clothes, her "fear of her own body" (which she attributed to sexual abuse she suffered as a child) left her with a self-consciousness exacerbated in the *Vogue* columnist's company. After one of Mary's parties, Woolf declared: "I'm going to come down with both feet on this dress mania ... this tremendous susceptibility". It's an aspect of her relationship with Mary that is drawn on in "The New Dress" (1924), the second story in the Dalloway series, where Mabel Waring comes to Clarissa's party, sees herself in the mirror and finds herself suddenly "sordid, repulsive" – her new dress a sign of her "appalling inadequacy."

Woolf asked Mary to write a practical manual that could explain how to dress and shop for the Hogarth Press. It never appeared, but "Mrs Dalloway in Bond St", much like the novel, starts with an account of Clarissa in a dress shop, thinking about how to tackle all that needs doing for a party later. After its publication in 1923, Mary wrote a Flinders piece, "Streets to Shop In", for the *Nation and Athenaeum* (where Leonard Woolf was literary editor). Discussing the virtues of shopping on Bond Street, it mimics Virginia's short story. Mary was aware that she was the inspiration for Clarissa, and that the matter was even a kind of in-joke between her and the Woolfs.

After a dinner the Woolfs hosted for Mary and T. S. Eliot in June 1922, Virginia wrote:

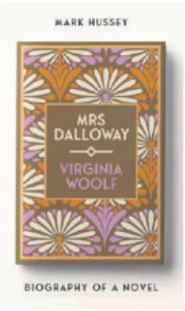
> Eliot dined ... [here] & read his poem ... The Waste Land, it is called; & Mary Hutch, who has heard it more quietly, interprets it to be Tom's autobiography ... I am going to be well on with a story ... so that I can vary the side of the pillow as fortune inclines ... I shall produce Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street as the finished product.

Here we gain a startling insight into the inspiration for *Mrs Dalloway*'s double-helix structure – which "varies the side of the pillow" between Clarissa and Septimus. This is not to deny the extent to which Woolf, consciously or unconsciously, embedded aspects of herself into her characters, but rather to suggest that if we want to understand how Woolf conceived her unlikely pair, we might look first to those seated across from her at dinner, Mary – and her best friend, T. S. Eliot.

Mary had introduced dear "Tom" to the Woolfs some years previously, hoping that they might publish his poetry. And after that dinner, *The Waste Land* was indeed published by the Hogarth Press, with Woolf heavily involved in its production. In the summer of 1923, she spent her mornings working on *Mrs Dalloway* and her afternoons "setting the whole of Mr. Eliot's poem with my own hands".

The Eliot scholar Erwin Steinberg noted the many threads that connect Septimus to *The Waste Land* and to Eliot. The most significant is that both Septimus and Eliot suffered a psychotic break as a result of losing a close male friend in the war. Septimus hallucinates in Regent's Park, seeing a grey man walk towards him: "It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds." Eliot, too, spoke of how *The Waste Land* was about "a friend who was later [...] mixed with the mud of Gallipoli" (Jean Verdenal, who died in action in the Dardanelles). In his memoir, Leonard Woolf tells us that Eliot, recovering from a breakdown in the autumn of 1921, came to stay with the Woolfs. He describes how "Tom changed inside himself ... to the extent perhaps that anyone ever can change inside himself after his first good cry on leaving his mother's womb".

With Mary and Eliot inserted back into the picture, there's a sudden coming-together of the pieces of the *Mrs Dalloway* puzzle. One is left wondering why Woolf couldn't have been more explicit about what she was doing, as she was with the dedication in *Orlando*. But her lips were sealed. Even when her close literary confidant Jacques Raverat pressed her for details, she deflected. "What am I writing? I don't think I shall tell you because ... I'm so terrifically egotistic about my writing, think practically of nothing else, [and so] ... will never mention it, unless someone draws it out of me with red hot pincers." ■




# *Mrs Dalloway* at 100

## The life and afterlife of Woolf's classic

VANESSA CURTIS

**MRS DALLOWAY**
Biography of a novel
**MARK HUSSEY**
232pp. Manchester University Press. £18.99.

*Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's fourth novel, was published on May 14, 1925. Released to coincide with the centenary of one of Woolf's most popular novels, Mark Hussey's analysis concerns a productive and prolific period in the author's life. (She had already gained a reputation as a modernist writer by publishing *Jacob's Room*, had founded the Hogarth Press and was starting to consider the essays that would later become *The Common Reader*.) At first glance, the structure of Hussey's book appears to have much in common with that of a traditional biography, but the notable difference is that there are no gloomy final chapters devoted to demise and death – for *Mrs Dalloway*, as he reminds us, "thrummed along in university classrooms for nearly a century" and, as he ably demonstrates in the last section of his book, seems well set to live on for some time yet.

*Mrs Dalloway* is widely considered to be one of Woolf's more accessible novels, and Hussey has matched the tone of her prose by producing a book that is both literary and readable. He opens with the unexpected and irresistible first line "Virginia Woolf was a messy writer", and reveals himself to be a self-confessed *Dalloway* obsessive with the inclusion of a photograph showing his own towering stack of about twenty editions. Such personal touches, and the author's almost palpable enthusiasm, enhance a lively and well-drawn portrait of the novel's conception, birth and afterlife.

In his first section, "Drafting *Mrs Dalloway*", Hussey explores the complex origins of the book, looking at how Clarissa Dalloway made a cameo appearance in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, as well as featuring in several short stories and an early draft of *Mrs Dalloway* initially entitled "The Hours". These literary developments are set against the story of Woolf's life during the early 1920s. By this time, she had finally persuaded her husband, Leonard, of her need to escape the confines of suburban Richmond after recuperating there from years of ill health; instead, she had carved out an enjoyable writing routine split between the countryside and a new house in Bloomsbury. Soon the shops, parks and streets that she explored in town with such pleasure would colour and shape the events that occurred in *Mrs Dalloway*.

As ever with Woolf, life informed art to a high degree. Hussey reflects on how the tragedy of the novel – the suicide at a party of the young soldier Septimus Smith – was created from memories of her own mental breakdowns and traumatic experiences with doctors, as well as from time spent reading about the horrors of "shell shock". Not all influences were so obvious. Hussey reveals how Woolf also tapped into feelings that she recalled from the experience of going to meet Leonard at the station one evening, only to find that he wasn't there, an event that caused an escalation of blind panic. Woolf, says Hussey, was "a magpie" in the way in which she accumulated information for her fiction.

A later part of the book, "*Mrs Dalloway* out in the world", studies early reactions to, and reviews of, the novel when it was first published. Hussey discusses the comparisons made with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Wyndham Lewis was characteristically scathing about Woolf's novel, describing a particular scene as an "undergraduate imitation" of one included in Joyce's novel). Woolf herself was initially wary of reading Joyce, influenced, Hussey posits, by her brother-in-law Clive Bell's experiences of meeting the author in Paris and taking an instant dislike to him. After hearing rave reviews of *Ulysses* from her friend T. S. Eliot, she relented, writing about the novel for the *TLS*, but unable to resist summarizing it as a "memorable catastrophe". Yet the two books, both set over the course of one day, both dealing with the concept of "the double", continue to be seen as similar, despite what Hussey rightly refers to as "the quite profound differences among these writers' experiments with the narrative representation of human consciousness".

"*Mrs Dalloway*'s legacies" proves to be the most original part of Hussey's book, for here he casts his net wide to bring together an extraordinarily diverse selection of *Dalloway*-influenced culture from the worlds of art, dance, music and literature. As well as looking in detail at how the film *The Hours* boosted sales of both Michael Cunningham's novel and *Mrs Dalloway*, and brought a new audience to Woolf's fiction, Hussey also discusses the recent ballet adaptation *Woolf Works*, which "incorporates a recording of the sound of Big Ben tolling throughout". He touches on the influence of Woolf's novel in the work of Zadie Smith, Christopher Isherwood and David Lodge, reminding us that their adaptations of *Mrs Dalloway* share the same considerable challenge: "to capture its interiority".

A short final chapter comes neatly up to date, with Hussey reproducing illustrations from the *Mrs Dalloway* comic by R. E. Parrish and detailing the various "Dalloway Day" walks that often take place around Westminster, Regent's Park and Bloomsbury. Hussey finishes with a look at how our recent experiences of Covid-19, rich in parallels with the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918–20, afford us a curious insight into Clarissa Dalloway's day of walking the city streets and purchasing essential everyday items that seemed somehow weighted with a new significance. In the novel, she has survived a bout of that life-threatening influenza, so our own recent years of living through a similar period, Hussey says, give us a poignant understanding of "Richard's insistence that she must rest" due to "her weakened heart".

Hussey's book is an enjoyable and expansive dissection of a well-known novel. It allows the author to focus predominantly on one successful period of Woolf's life, so the tone remains resolutely upbeat and avoids any need to dwell for too long on the overdocumented miseries of both her early Victorian upbringing and the final, difficult years leading up to her death. It is also a masterly lesson in how to read Woolf. Hussey demonstrates an admirable understanding of the mindset and processes necessary for a reader to get the most out her writing when he comments: "The sense of flux, of some reality always just beyond one's reach, and the necessity of a reader's active engagement in creating the text characterizes much of Woolf's fiction". This, he adds, "can either jar the reader who expects a more 'traditional' static notion of the self, or seem to another exactly how reality is experienced".

This successful "biographical" approach to a well-known novel perhaps paves the way for further similar studies of Woolf's fiction. The book will bring readers to Woolf for the first time and encourage those already familiar with her novel to return to it with a fresh perspective. Mrs Dalloway may have bought the flowers herself, but Mark Hussey has potentially given her the gift of renewed popularity, ensuring that Clarissa will walk the streets of her beloved London for a good while longer. ■

> **He touches on the influence of Woolf's novel in the work of Zadie Smith, Christopher Isherwood and David Lodge**

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