

MOURNING, GENDER MELANCHOLIA, AND SUBVERSIVE HOMOEROTICISM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF' *MRS DALLOWAY* AND MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S *THE HOURS*.

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Abstract: Postmodern re-interpretations of Freud's theory of mourning have been utilised by political activists to challenge hegemonic gender constructions and heterosexism, most notably during the AIDS epidemic. In *Psychic Lives of Power*, Judith Butler, using Freud as her source, identifies a culture of 'gender melancholy', whereby the gender binary and heteronormativity are established through the incorporation of the excluded and ungrievable same-sex love-object through heightened gender identification. By exploring the relationship between mourning and gender/sexual roles through the lens of Butler's notion of gender melancholy, I will examine the ways in which Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* negotiate between self and civilisation; rendered apparent in the uncovering of a subversive homoeroticism and in the metaphor of mourning one's lost youth and the death of the other. In a comparison between modernist and postmodernist approaches to gender melancholia and non-normative mourning practices, I will examine to what extent these texts utilise psychoanalytic approaches to mourning to challenge the hegemony of the gender binary and heterosexism in society.

Key-words: gender melancholy, mourning, Virginia Woolf, Michael Cunningham

The negotiation between the individual and society results in an inevitable loss. The individual must either conform to the gender binary and compulsory heterosexuality, which are constituted through the self's separation from the other in, what Judith Butler terms, the 'melancholic incorporation of [that] "Other"' ('Imitation' 27). Or follow their personal desire and refuse entrance into society, resulting in social ostracism and self-destruction if the pleasure principle is unimpeded (Freud *Civilization* 18). In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, this negotiation between self and civilisation is rendered apparent in the metaphor of mourning a lost youth and the death of the other. Both texts are located in an epoch of civilisation in crisis - the aftermath of WW1 and the AIDS epidemic, respectively - in which death becomes a social devastation and traditional gender roles and sexual paradigms are strictly defended (Clewell 31; Nunokawa 311). The public consolatory beliefs of WW1 perpetuated the 'prewar values that placed male combatants on the battlefield and devalued women's social roles' (Clewell 27). While societal homophobia 'not only inhibit[ed] the work of acknowledging the loss of a gay man, [but also] cast his death as his definition' (Nunokawa 319). By exploring the relationship between mourning and gender/sexual roles through the lens of Butler's theory of

gender melancholy, I will examine the ways in which Woolf and Cunningham negotiate the inevitability of loss, be it through subversion or submission to society, and to what extent they challenge the hegemony of the gender binary and heterosexism.

In *Psychic Life of Power*, Butler derives her analysis from a rereading of Freud's theory of mourning. In 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud defines mourning as a healthy detachment from the lost object, while melancholia pathologically incorporates the lost object into the ego. Freud later theorised that melancholic incorporation is integral to the process of mourning and the formation of subjectivity (*Ego* 29). Butler, using Freud as her source, identifies a culture of 'gender melancholy', whereby the gender binary and heteronormativity are established through 'prohibitions which *demand the loss* of certain sexual attachments and demand that those losses *not* be avowed, and not be grieved' (135). Butler configures "masculinity" and "femininity" as incorporating the excluded and ungrievable same-sex love-object through heightened gender identification (146). For the construction of gender is predicated on the 'accomplishment of an always tenuous heterosexuality' that necessitates the prohibition of homosexuality (135). By uncovering the homoeroticism behind

gender melancholy, I intend to demonstrate the subversive strategies in Woolf and Cunningham's novels.

Mrs Dalloway is more than a representation of mourning wartime losses, for Woolf's depiction of 'private female grief' holds a wider scope as part of her feminist vision in an appeal for 'gender reform' (Clewell 17). Ostensibly, Clarissa fulfils the post-war housewife paradigm as she prepares for her party. Woolf's free indirect narrative, however, undermines this impression by setting the superficial observation of Clarissa's neighbour, 'A charming woman' (1), at odds with Clarissa's fluctuating interiority. Woolf depicts Clarissa as a divided subject, who experiences:

this body, with all its capacities, [as] nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible ... not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway. (8-9)

Clarissa's social persona adheres to the conventions of femininity through her 'charming' performance of housewifely duties. While her interior monologue suggests dissociation from her body, exemplified by the demonstrative instead of possessive pronoun ('this body'). Clarissa perceives her body as a 'caricature' of womanhood, 'as unfeminine, aged, asexual' (Panken 137), no longer able to succeed in performing the female function of wife and mother. She mourns her lost youth, 'not even Clarissa anymore', as the conventions of femininity disavow her physical desires and self-identity.

Clarissa's indirect interior monologue attains vitality when she reminisces about her adolescence at Bourton and one memory, in particular, that she identifies as 'the most exquisite moment of her whole life' (34): when Sally kisses her on the lips. Clarissa visualises the kiss in material terms, as 'a present, a diamond, something infinitely precious... the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!' (34). She revels in the memory of its excessive sensuality - its tactile, visual, and transcendent qualities - represented by her effervescent recollection. Within this present-day disclosure of homoeroticism, Clarissa abstracts the same-sex kiss into the symbol of the gift, 'dissociat[ing] her from her sensations' (Moran 30). Despite this distancing of physical pleasure, Clarissa values Sally's affection over Peter's heterosexual advances, which she describes with revulsion as, 'running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness!' (34). Clarissa associates heterosexual passion with desublimation as the memory shifts from illumination and transparency ('a diamond', 'the radiance burnt through') to an ominous darkness that threatens her bodily integrity. Although Clarissa's homoerotic experimentation is condemned to an irretrievable past, her homosexual desire persists in her ongoing memories of that 'exquisite moment'. Clarissa's unrelenting same-sex longings suggest that she is suffering

from gender melancholy. As Clarissa, unable to transgress the norms of society and fulfil her homosexual desires, constructs an impenetrable exterior - as perfect housewife in a sexless, companionate marriage - and enacts her yearnings in the precincts of her memory. Only Lady Rosseter, Clarissa's childhood sweetheart, is able to pierce her facade, exclaiming 'Clarissa is at heart a snob' (193), but then perceptively elucidates, 'Are we not all prisoners?' (196).

One character that refuses to be incarcerated within gender/sexual conventions is Septimus, the shell-shocked war veteran and poet. Critics categorise Septimus as Clarissa's spiritual double (Moran 82); however, I will demonstrate how their characters fundamentally differ. Like Clarissa, Septimus ostensibly fulfils the paradigm of masculinity demanded of men during and after WW1, by volunteering first and developing the 'manliness' demanded by his country (86). In an imitation of war rhetoric, Woolf's narrator expands, 'he went to France to save England' only to qualify this patriotism with the acerbic critique: 'an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole' (86). Woolf deconstructs society's heteronormativity by suggesting that homosocial bonds between men at war breeds homoeroticism rather than bolstering heterosexual masculinity. For beneath the narrator's replication of war rhetoric, a subversive

homoeroticism surfaces: 'he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name. It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug' (86). Here, the narrator appropriates the language of war through the concise sentences ('Evans by name') only to undermine hegemony through the nearly homonymous 'attention' and 'affection', highlighting the proximity of the homosocial and homoerotic in the bonds produced by war. Like the metaphor of the gift, Woolf's invocation of the playing dogs introduces a physicality that compels a homoerotic interpretation. Woolf positions the homoeroticism between Septimus and Evans as playful, innocent, even life-affirming; which is underscored by a direct contrast to his sexless marriage and disgust for heterosexuality: 'The business of copulation was filth to him. But, Rezia said, she must have children. They had been married five years' (89). When Evans is killed during the war, Septimus initially 'congratulated himself upon feeling very little. The War had taught him' to repress his emotions. However, Septimus eventually responds by becoming 'engaged when the panic was on him - that he could not feel' (87). Some critics assign Septimus's shellshock to homosexual guilt (Bazin 110); however, my analysis demonstrates that Woolf does not express a heteronormative perspective, but privileges homoeroticism. Another interpretation

of Septimus's shellshock is that Septimus fails to mourn the loss of Evans (Spilka 63) and, as I will argue, his inability to grieve the suppression of his homosexuality. Septimus's inability to grieve the loss of his homosexual beloved results in a pathological form of gender melancholy in his hallucinations of Evans's return from the dead and his suicide as he succumbs to the inevitable loss of self that conforming to societal expectations entails.

Septimus's suicide assumes significance beyond personal loss when Clarissa perceives his death as 'defiance' (187). Clarissa uncovers the secret of his grief when she contemplates, 'But this young man who had killed himself - had he plunged holding his treasure? "If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy," she said to herself once' (187). Here, Clarissa associates her adolescent love for Sally with Septimus's motive for suicide by recalling her post-kiss sentiment and linking his secret ('treasure') with the gift metaphor of the kiss. Clarissa expresses the world's hostility to such secret loves, when she denounces the medical profession for 'forcing your soul' into their heteronormative categories and making 'life intolerable' (188). Critics have condemned Woolf for constituting Clarissa's subjectivity at the expense of Septimus's suicide: 'put crudely, can someone else's death be your revelation?' (Freedman 83). For Septimus

becomes the scapegoat for Clarissa's dissident energies and discontent, when Clarissa concedes that she is 'glad he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living' (189). At the novel's close, Clarissa is promptly reinserted into the housewife paradigm with Peter's statement: 'It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was' (198), in which the past tense finalises the irretrievable loss of her former self and inevitability of her physical demise.

In *The Hours*, Cunningham renders *Mrs Dalloway's* veiled homoeroticism explicit in his late twentieth century rewriting. Cunningham differentiates his post-modernist text from its modernist predecessor by offering a triptych narrative, which includes a modern-day Clarissa who marries Sally and prepares a party for her friend living with AIDS as well as a fictional biography of Woolf and a discontent 1950s housewife who escapes from her "feminine" duties by reading *Mrs Dalloway*. *The Hours*, however, is not a straightforward celebration of modern sexualities as his characters continue to be troubled by the demands of sexual conformity.

Cunningham's Clarissa may be free to desire whomever she chooses, but she still experiences the burden of conventional gender roles. Although Clarissa and Sally do not 'disguise their love for anyone's sake' (20), the other characters criticise their domestic set up for resembling heterosexuality (20; 130;

160). Clarissa, herself, feels she is 'pretending' and experiences herself, like Woolf's Clarissa, as a caricature, which would reveal 'herself' if the performance of domestic bliss with Sally ceased (92). Clarissa searches for her lost self, mourning the 'missed opportunity' (97), analogous to Mrs Dalloway, represented by a kiss from her youth. Clarissa, however, concedes that the queer *ménage à trois* with Richard and Louis was ultimately impossible, when she rejects the 'vast and enduring romance so searing and profound it would accompany them to the grave' for the 'stable and affectionate marriage' to Sally (97). The extreme pleasures offered by the seditious queer relationship are tempting for Clarissa. However, her idealisation of that rejected possibility is over-shadowed by death; for the unrestrained pleasure principle results in the ego's self-destruction.

Clarissa's adherence to conventional femininity does not unquestioningly incarcerate her within a heterosexual paradigm, for Clarissa's displays a self-knowledge by perceiving her feminine acts as a self-conscious performance. When Louis categorises her housewifely gestures as 'gone beyond wifeliness', Clarissa undermines this with the performative remark: "'Look at me. An old woman fussing with her roses'" (130). Here, Clarissa contests hegemonic ideology - that gender is expressive of an innate sexual identity, which regulates gender and sexual

praxis (Butler *Gender* 46) - by self-consciously allegorising gender melancholy in her merging of ideal femininity with homosexuality. In Clarissa's mutual performance of femininity and homosexuality, she enacts, what Butler calls, 'gay melancholia that can be translated into political expression' (*Psychic* 147). By including homoeroticism within femininity, Clarissa demonstrates 'the weakness in heterosexual subjectivation and refute[s] [heterosexism's] logic of mutual exclusion' (*ibid* 148), whereby her performance of femininity does not result in homoerotic loss.

The Hours rewrites Septimus as Richard, an acclaimed poet and AIDS sufferer whose belated access to the antiretroviral drug could not save his mind from being 'eaten into lace by the virus' (55). Here, Cunningham draws a parallel between the losses of WW1 and the AIDS crisis by depicting both characters as physically surviving but psychically damaged and driven to suicide. Jodie Medd writes, 'Richard and Septimus uncomfortably remind their contemporaries of the irreparable damage caused by the century's events' (174), as well as censuring, I believe, the callous unresponsiveness of the government and medical profession. Cunningham reverses the prevalent metaphors of AIDS - its association with 'decomposition' and 'a calamity one brings on oneself' (Sontag 41; 26) - through Richard's elucidation that he feels the illness 'closing around

me like the jaws of a gigantic flower. Think of the Venus flytrap. It's a juicy, green, thriving progress' (198). Richard re-inscribes his illness not as putrefaction but as the organic engulfment of his body, embodied in the metaphor of the devouring plant. Richard views his body's consumption as an inescapable outcome of decadence, exemplified through the medically inaccurate portrayal of AIDS as a 'thriving progress'. Despite Richard's inevitable demise, Cunningham compares his fate with his ex-lover, Louis, who is 'spared' from the ravages of Richard's illness (135). In this contrast, Cunningham undermines the pervasive homophobic belief: 'AIDS is a gay disease and means death' (Nunokawa 312), demonstrating that not all gay men contract the disease and the development of antiretroviral drugs means that AIDS is not a death sentence.

Cunningham revises the close of *Mrs Dalloway* by cancelling Clarissa's party, yet he re-inscribes the intimate gathering as a life-affirming 'party for the not-yet-dead; for those who for mysterious reasons have the fortune to be alive' (226), characterising death as arbitrary and life as a moment to be enjoyed. In depicting Richard's suicide as non-transcendental, Clarissa - deciding to live in the present moment - finally completes the mourning of her lost youth to achieve an independent self-identity. Her closing

present-tense statement asserts her own identity: 'here she is, herself, Clarissa, not Mrs. Dalloway anymore; there is no one now to call her that. Here she is with another hour before her' (226). By avowing her loss and openly grieving, Clarissa asserts her autonomy by liberating herself from the external narratives that, denying her personal identity through the impossibility of mourning loss, tried to capture her within their classificatory snare.

Woolf traces a subversive, life-affirming homoeroticism in her character's discontentment with gender conformity through her formal experimentation with free indirect discourse. Woolf's revelation of Clarissa and Septimus's gender melancholy, however, does not provide a solution to the loss of self that is inevitable in the negotiation between the individual and society. Cunningham's revision of *Mrs Dalloway* attempts to discover a route out of the seemingly inescapable binary of social conformity or self-destructive pleasure. In Cunningham's depiction of AIDS, he succeeds in representing the suffering of those who died, while also exploring the impact of antiretroviral drugs on the gay community in which socially dissident pleasures need not mean death. By re-signifying homosexuality as non-fatal and liberating Clarissa - through her display of self-identity, open mourning, and performative gestures - from

incarcerating discourses, Cunningham optimistically imagines a future in which yielding to personal desires does not entail inevitable death.

Notes

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