
Split Perspectives: An Intertextual Study of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Middle Ground*

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Abstract:

In spite of living in different times and worshipping disparate aesthetics, Virginia Woolf and Margaret Drabble, as two highly-esteemed women writers in English literary heritage, seem to have reached a consensus in the in-depth exploration of split perspectives of mid-aged women in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Middle Ground* respectively.

The intricate connection between the two novels has been observed and discussed by a few critics both at home and abroad, but has not been analysed systematically. For this reason, this paper attempts to carry out an intertextual study of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Middle Ground* within the framework of Julia Kristeva's intertextuality theory.

Keywords: Split Perspectives, Mid-aged women, Intertextuality

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1. INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf, one of the greatest women writers in British literary field, has made immeasurable contribution to the Modernistic Movement by reason of her experimental stream of consciousness novels. She has received a wide critical accolade of her best remembered stream-of-consciousness cannon *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which she applied interior monologue and multiple points of view to the manifestation of her definition of life. Through *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf introduced a fresh perspective to the stagnant British world of letters and exerted immense impingement on her successors. Margaret Drabble, a famous contemporary woman writer, has dedicated herself to women issues and acquired repute by her evolutionary craftsmanship and widening perspectives. In *The Middle Ground* published in 1980, Drabble grew out of her previous monotonous first person point of view and introduced an inclusive panorama of heterogeneous perspectives. Consequently, by subverting conventional narrative in favour of a dizzy kaleidoscope of manifold streams of consciousness, *The Middle Ground* is intended to an objective analysis of the female protagonist Kate Armstrong's mid-life crisis. In order to unravel Kate's confusion and loss of direction, Drabble ventures into her protagonist's past history and state of mind in hope of searching a solution, which echoes Woolf's characterization of Clarissa.

In spite of living in different times and worshipping disparate aesthetics, as two highly-esteemed women writers in English literary heritage, Virginia Woolf and Margaret Drabble have reached a consensus in the in-depth exploration of split perspectives of mid-aged women in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Middle Ground* respectively.

French philosopher Julia Kristeva explained her intertextuality theory as, "Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."¹ The dissection of the word "intertextuality" coined by Kristeva leads to the plain explanation of "interrelationship of among texts" realized by novelists' borrowing from or rebellion against past literary forms, frankly or surreptitiously, affectionately or contemptuously. Written in 1980, *The Middle Ground* is inevitably influenced by the postmodernist movement that deconstructs writings into "text" and advocates the repetitive replication of prior works. Indebted to Mrs. Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Drabble converted her original fear and understanding of Woolf and wrote this novel to pay homage to *Mrs. Dalloway* with a tone of parody, an acknowledged technique in intertextual writing. On the basis of this discovery, this paper has deconstructed *The Middle Ground* to trace its prototype from *Mrs. Dalloway* in hope of applying the intertextual approach to revisit these two novels.

2. SPLIT PERSPECTIVES OF THE MID-AGED

¹ Kristeva, J. 1980, p. 66.

Middle age is an awkward period when one is stuck between two walls – the irretrievable past and the inevitable death. Oddly enough, one is a conventional upper class lady whose primary preoccupations are family trivialities and her husband's highest interest; the other is a modern self-made journalist whose utmost concerns are feminist issues, Clarissa and Kate are like two parallel lines, totally exclusive to each other. However, in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Middle Ground*, these two middle-aged women have to confront the same sense of uncertainty and loss of direction. To make it worse, the female identity doubles their apprehension under the patriarchal dominance, these half-awakening women are forced into experiencing miserable metamorphosis. The architect of modern identity theory Erik Erikson "conceives it is both formed and manifested through social relationships. The concept includes both a core configuration of personal character and one's consciousness of that configuration."² As long as one is no longer sure about the justification of the configuration of one's personal character into social relationships, identity crisis would be induced. No pattern can be found to figure out the enigma of the middle years when the past haunts constantly and the future is hazy, only death is inevitable. Life and death, prose and passion, participation and solitude, inner self and social self, these opposing dichotomies clash in Clarissa and Kate's minds, constituting their split perspectives.

2.1. Split Perspectives of Clarissa Dalloway

Middle age is a watershed separating youthhood when Clarissa was glamorous and capable of filling "the room she entered"³ and old age when death trumpets victory with a brandishing gesture, her fear of the dwindling life creates enormous apprehension in her heart. "The leaden circles dissolved in the air" (MD, 54) announced by the booming striking of Big Ben is a ponderous omen of the irrevocable time, suspending Clarissa's heart; especially in the middle of her life since her illness, she grows sensitive to the time along with which one's life gradually dwindles into the "narrow bed". However, Clarissa's positive defensive mechanism in time rescues her from the plunge into gloomy thoughts. "Such fools we are" (MD, 6), she shrugs off her melancholy sensation and attributes her ineffable zeal for life to the Almighty heaven, intrigued by every trace that represents the life: vision, sound, even the Acts of Parliament. Even so, Clarissa is still incapable of dispelling the threat of indomitable death with her reiteration of the sheet stretched and the bed narrow. "She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged" (MD, 10), illness and age drive Clarissa to an equivocal state of loving life and embracing death at the same time in that everything in front of her enchanting her, including the fat lady in the street, but a swift turning of her mind brings her into a genuine appreciation of the inviolable death which, in contrast to the evanescent daily life, symbolizes eternity where she and Peter "survived, lived in each other", she perpetuates her image of an upright

² Gardiner, J. K. 1981, p. 349-350.

³ Woolf, V. 1996. *Mrs. Dalloway*. UK: Penguin Popular Classics. p.34. Further references to this edition will be indicated by quoting initials MD and page number in parentheses.

hostess “like a mist between the people she knew best” (MD, 11). In spite of being a skeptic, her firm belief in the immortality of one’s apparition after the termination of the corporal self sustains in her heart. Her metaphysical theory about life and death renders vitality and confidence to her in defense against looming death.

As Johanna Garvey observes, “She continually alternates between poles – of life and death, heat and cold, community and solitude.”⁴ Her passion for life and communication is intermittently interwoven with her self-deprecating, flickering frustration, which unsettles and unnerves her conscience interminably. Clarissa’s retreat to her cloistered attic is an obvious embodiment of her penchant for self-preservation, this sense of isolation indeed renders her tranquility and security requested by her inner self, but at the same time frustrates her because her opposite social self anticipates life-enchanting experience. “If communal experience is the focal point of Clarissa’s universe, awareness of individual isolation, even alienation, from others is the key to her awareness of herself.”⁵ To Clarissa, “one’s independence, one’s self-respect” (MD, 132) are valuable to one’s core, even between husband and wife, which results in her ultimate choice of dignified and unperturbed Richard. This feeling of impenetrability is deep rooted in her personal self, but her coldness is of no deterrent to her yearning for binding people together in a party where people communicate merely in a worldly way, no conscience intruded, no privacy disturbed, no respect trodden. Moreover, “what she liked was simply life”, a party “was an offering; to combine, to create” (MD, 132), to create what? The communal memory. The harmonious and snug aura of a party bestows on everyone a willingness to connect with each other, the exact purpose of Clarissa, who as the hostess hopes to perpetuate life in fight with the “unbelievable death”.

In addition to the perturbation caused by her oscillation between life and death, communication and isolation, another predicament haunting Clarissa originates from her innate identity. Identity crisis actually refers to Clarissa’s incessant conflict between her respectable role of a perfect upper class wife and her dormant intuition for vitality and energy. For thirty years, she functions for others and justifies her existence according to accepted social norms. This total abandonment of one’s heart engenders her doubt for the lost thirty years; especially the return of Peter Walsh revives her recollection of the days at Bourton when she possessed vigor and radiance penetrated from her true self. Knifelike Clarissa plays the role of an on-looker who relentlessly absorbs every nuance of life but stays aloof and calm, for “the privacy of the soul” (MD, 10) is what she won’t give up at all cost, that’s also the reason why she has chosen Richard over Peter with whom “everything had to be shared; everything gone into” (MD, 10); the two opposing attitudes taking upper hand alternately culminates in her tormented soul, causing her predicament of middle years even worse. Encapsulating her half-past life within

⁴ Garvey, J. 1991. p.76.

⁵ Littleton, J. 1995, p.46.

five lines from “a child throwing bread to the ducks” to “a grown woman holding her life in her arms”, Clarissa sinks into self-interrogation, “this is what I have made of it! This! [...] What, indeed?” (MD, 48) It seems that Clarissa has acquired everything she desired by dint of reconciliation with the accepted social standards and suppression of her true self. Shielded by glittering silver and exquisite dress, a sense of emptiness still lingers in her heart, for the realization of her youthful goal of life suddenly means nothing to her, “what? Indeed.” So, under the disguise of whole-hearted devotion to her family, Clarissa still preserves her longing for freedom and adventure. “Take me with you” (MD, 54) her impulse of eloping with Peter recalls the rapture of her youthhood, which is cautiously concealed in order to pave the way for her social expectation. Conforming to the rules pinpointed by society, she only sees in herself “a pointed, dartlike, definite” Mrs. Dalloway whose true identity is overshadowed by her husband’s social identity. She chooses to adjust to her mature role as a perfect hostess, whereas at the same time, agonized by the coldness and alienation in her, she excavates the past to justify her present state. Her recurring wavering between confidence and despair, love and fear constitutes the thread of the novel.

2.2. Split Perspectives of Kate Armstrong

This inescapable sense of self-doubt and uncertainty not only gnaws at Clarissa’s heart, but also unsettles Kate Armstrong’s conscience into tracing her past in hope of regaining the confidence in life. In other people’s eyes, Kate is successful and charismatic, but in fact she can never get rid of her childhood’s shadow. On social level, she likes to enjoy people’s attention; when she is alone with her heart, she becomes the self-denying, self-doubtful middle-aged woman who gradually loses the prospect of her life and career. As a dashing, arduous journalist, her curiosity propels her to venture into issues of great diversity and to gain prosperity in her career, which seems to be irrelevant to her past; whereas her phobia of travelling abroad, to some extent, inherited from her mother’s agoraphobia is the impediment on her way to a broader scope. Fully aware of the gradual drainage of her faculty of indignation and sympathy due to the middle-age inertia, Kate is confronted by the unavoidable bottleneck of her career and personal life. Her pronouncement of feminist hot topics in previous years is incompatible with her condition after breaking up with Ted. Hard work and flings with a bunch of men are justified in her former opinions, but the disappointing effect forces her to suspect what she has advocated highly for years. While “now reason had abandoned her, in her hour of need”⁶, and the arrival of Mujid during Kate’s downcast spell exacerbates her uncertainty about life. Mujid’s interminable harangue and critical judgment reduced her to a state of incapability and helplessness, what she originally took pride in turns out to be disorderly. But her good nature forbids her to kick Mujid out even though he has brought her down from her illusional pyramid to defensiveness which sometimes “lurch into aggression” (TMG, 86). Moreover, Kate’s

⁶ Drabble, M. 1980. *The Middle Ground*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. p. 72. Further references to this edition will be indicated by quoting initials TMG and page numbers in parentheses.

paradoxical personalities are revealed by Evelyn. Through the school's Parent-Teacher Association, Kate becomes friend with Evelyn Stennet whose husband has later developed an affair with Kate, upon which Evelyn acquiesces. On some level, Evelyn holds an affectionate feeling toward Kate, she subconsciously comes up with Kate's comment on Puss, on marriage and on an absurd story. Only an influential character as Kate can exert such great impression on other people. Whereas on the other side, Evelyn shows contempt for her "wild opinions", her "eccentric outbursts", her "haphazard hospitality", her dotation on her children and "the constant flux of her home", "the Hunts, the Mujids and the Stuarts which Kate surrounded her" (TMG, 230). This bohemian, radical side of Kate is loathsome to intelligent, serious Evelyn. While as a sort of pretext, Kate divulges to Evelyn that the motivation of her acceptance of so many "helpless people" lies in her manipulative desire and domineering position of being the centre of stage, which justifies her relentless search into the past.

The present is in close connection with the past whose impingement is indelible and everlasting. Talkative and urbane Kate turns silent and frustrated in front of her parents who did not render enough devotion and caring to her, the vibe of estrangement and alienation among her family members culminates in her paranoiac craving for attention and admiration from other people in order to gain integrity and uptightness. As she says, "I sometimes think that if so many people weren't leaning on me, from different directions, I might fall over" (TMG, 261). Her predicament roots in her split perspectives: one is of a sociable, humorous and uptight career woman; the other is of a self-doubting, pessimistic child. Though her present social self as a "prattling, chattering journalist in Kentish Town" seems to have nothing to do with her deeply concealed personal self – "that child in its skimpy cotton dress, lonely, cast out, cut off" (TMG, 119), they are interwoven together involuntarily to run through Kate's blood, constituting her split perspectives – grievances against as well as love for her parents. Her obsession with underground is a reflection of her unconscious linkage with her past.

Through these interviews with middle-aged women, Kate comes to realisation that "one is both oneself and a composite of family relationships"⁷. When editing the interviews on Romley women, Kate is stuck with the puzzle of summarizing a pattern, which turns out to be impossible. Her contradictory mentality also shows on the topic of marriage – marriage, on the one hand, renders women love and care, and on the other hand represses women's intuition and self-consciousness. That's why her claim on the exclusiveness of her house and the privacy of her life form contrast to her reliance on people, only a temporary flow of friends is acceptable. Kate contributes her "death of a soul" to the denial of her nature by doing the right thing. This repression of one's passion in favour of a rational self superficially complies with intangible social standards, the triumph of civilization, but enervates the soul into a state of total capitulation. The deadlock in Kate's career is parallel to her understanding of life. The futility

⁷ Sadler, L.V.. 1982, p. 90.

of “turning the sun into an article” (TMG, 109) is an implication of the indomitable power of the sun whose metaphoric reference is life. The unstoppable advance of life will not be eclipsed by mortalities, which relieves Kate of her tentative approach to “stillness” or death, for her unquenchable vitality of “enquiring, demanding an answer” is the stimulus of her striding forward and embracing life. Following the lively and exuberant summer, autumn with “falling leaves and bonfires” arouses in Kate the premonition of death. At dinner, a bunch of her mid-aged friends focus their topic on old age and death, at the crossroad of human life, the aversion against one’s aging body in fact is a reflection of one’s phobia of inviolable death. Inspired by an anecdote at this dinner, Kate’s unusual optimistic attitude to this autumn’s Indian summer dwindles into a supposition that “maybe an Indian summer was in store for each, a contented old age?” (TMG, 109) However, this melancholy sentimentality is instantaneously replaced by a confidence in the present life, “we gamble on the present, what else can we do?”

As a matter of fact, this clueless haphazardness is the source of her predicament in middle age, but Evelyn’s accident enlightens her into a revelation that “shapeless diversity, what was wrong with that?” (TMG, 203) The embrace of plurality and uncertainty liberates Kate from her old fear of origin, her insistent search for a pattern through tracing her past turns out to be inadequate. This yearn for simplicity and origin impels her to embark on the television documentary, accidentally, through which she comes to the conclusion that the multiplicity of possibilities and the randomness of selections are themselves patterns. The comprehension of the essence of life stimulates her to organize a multi-racial party to celebrate the plurality of the present and the unpredictability of the future.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in spite of their different social backgrounds and aesthetic concerns, Woolf and Drabble attach the same importance to the exploration of women’s perturbation and apprehension. The resemblance seethed in Kate and Clarissa is their constant need of confirmation through others’ recognition and preservation of solitude, their embrace of life and fear of death, and their identity crisis. This paper has elaborated on a comparative study of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Middle Ground* within the framework of Julia Kristeva’s intertextuality theory to discover their connection in an attempt to fill an important gap in this field. Drabble’s imitation of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* with a parodic tone and a realistic style, duplicating the existential paralysis of Woolf’s characters in the context of contemporary feminism, leads her to a brand new milestone in her literary career. It is expected that through this current paper more interest as well as awareness will be stimulated in intertextual study and readers will obtain more diverse and innovative perceptions in intertextual analysis.

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