Repression in 'Mrs Dalloway'

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In a psycho-analytical essay authored in 1925, Freud writes that 'the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated (..). Negation (is) a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed'[1]. In this essay, I will examine how Woolf presents sexuality in Mrs. Dalloway, specifically a repressed homosexuality, in the character of Clarissa by aligning her with the Freudian concept of paranoia as a symptom of sexual repression. This paper will, after establishing the rudiments of Freud's theory, explore how his concepts of the paranoiac symptoms erotomania, delusions of persecution and delusions of jealousy manifest through Woolf's characterization of Clarissa and how these negating symptoms allow the interpretation of her as a repressed lesbian fixated on her denied homosexuality. This paper will, moreover, examine Clarissa's heterosexual relationship with her husband, Richard versus her homosexual relationships with Lady Bruton and Doris Kilman as a means of compounding this Freudian interpretation of her.

The interpretation of Clarissa as a repressed homosexual can be principally conceived in the text's presentation of Clarissa and Richard's married relationship. Though this relationship appears, at first, to be of a genuinely intimate nature and of central importance both to the narrative and to Clarissa's character, exemplified by the marital title of Mrs. in the novel's name, this is arguably a false impression. It can be argued that Clarissa feels a sense of Freudian erotomania towards her husband rather than being genuinely enamored with him. Erotomania, defined by Freud as 'an external perception of being loved' displacing 'any internal perception of loving', especially emerges in Clarissa's characterization during the

[1] S. Freud, 'Negation,' *The Psychoanalytic Review (1913-1957)*, 15 (1928): pp.474-475.

scene in which Richard comes home to Clarissa after lunching[2]. When Richard first enters their shared home, Clarissa thinks 'but the door handle slipped round and in came Richard! What a surprise! In came Richard (..)' before remarking upon the 'flowers' he is holding again. The repetition of the word 'flowers' and the phrase 'in came Richard', coupled with Woolf's use of multiple exclamations suggest Clarissa's overwhelmed and disoriented frame of mind when encountering her husband and contrast with the tonal calm conveyed by the lack of exclamations in Clarissa's thoughts preceding this scene. This is only emphasized by Clarissa's first words to her husband in the narrative of 'How lovely they looked! she said. And was it amusing, she asked? Had Lady Bruton asked after her? Peter Walsh was back. Mrs. Marsham had written. Must she ask Ellie Henderson?'; this rapid succession of curt sentences and questions again lends a tone of chaos and anxiety to Clarissa's words. Moreover, the lack of speech marks used by Woolf when denoting Clarissa's speech here implies that, despite Clarissa currently being in conversation with her husband, the experience is of so little import to her that she has detached herself from it and is viewing it as a spectator. The stressed and maritally detached frame of mind possessed by Clarissa in this scene likens her to Freud's paranoic in that it suggests that she lacks sincere, internal emotions of love towards him and, instead, feels anxious and distant from him in their interactions together. Additionally, her frequent exclamations and rapidity of speech towards Richard could allow for the interpretation of her affections towards him as performative, aligning her with another characteristic Freud associated with erotomania— urgent attempts at an outward heterosexual fixation. This could allow for an alternate reading of the book's title as not embodying the normative domestic bliss of Clarissa and Richard's relationship but, in fact, reinforcing their marriage as an outward performance. Further evidence for the interpretation of Clarissa's erotomania is presented as this scene progresses; not only does Woolf's

[2] S. Freud, 'Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (1911)', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII: The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works (1911-1913)*, J. Strachey, A. Freud et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), pp.62-63.

interweaving of Richard's speech towards Clarissa with Clarissa's own internal monologue demonstrate, once more, Clarissa's utter detachment from Richard, but Clarissa's closing melancholic reflections on Richard further evoke this. Figurative language comparing Richard and Clarissa's relationship to a 'gulf' and an extended metaphor of Clarissa as '(searching) here and there vainly' in the wake of her talk with Richard portray the unsalvageable nature of their domestic separation with the use of the adverbs 'vainly' and 'desperately' particularly connoting the extent of Clarissa's marital strife.

The reading of Clarissa as sexually repressed is augmented by the potential interpretation of her character as exemplifying the paranoiac trait of delusions of jealousy. Freudian delusions of jealousy refer to attempts of repressed lesbians to deny their sexual preferences via projecting their own attraction to women onto their husbands and subsequently affecting false envy towards said women[3]. This symptom is narratively evident in Mrs Dalloway's jealousy of Lady Bruton and Richard; though Clarissa claims she has 'no vulgar jealousy' towards her husband and Lady Bruton, critics like Sharma have suggested otherwise, though without considering the potential queer interpretations arising from this jealousy[4]. Said jealousy and its queer implications are particularly evinced when Clarissa discovers that her husband is lunching with Lady Bruton; the single sentence paragraph of '"Mr. Dalloway, ma'am"--' preceding this revelation builds up suspense for it in a manner akin to that of the horror genre, emphasizing the disastrous effect this news will have on Clarissa's mental state. After discovering what her husband has done, Clarissa repeats the line 'fear no more the heat o' the sun', a reference to a funeral dirge from Shakespeare's Cymbeline that functions as a leitmotif throughout the novel. This morbid reference, described by Doner as connoting death, implies the unreasonable extent of jealousy invoked in Clarissa at this moment, in that she feels near death merely over the act of her husband lunching with another

Commented [RU1]: 1 Bernard Blackstone, Virginia Woolf, A Commentary (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 9S.

[3] See Freud (1911)

[4] B. D. Sharma, 'The Play of Jealousy in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway' in Creative Writing and Criticism, 9:01 (2011): pp.38-44.

woman[5]. Further repetitions of the phrase 'Lady Bruton (..) had not asked her' also add to Clarissa's perceived repression by insinuating not only that Clarissa is enviously fixated on her husband's betrayal of her but, furthermore, that Lady Bruton is the center of this fixation, not Richard, hence the reiteration of her name, particularly. Moreover, this phrase being repeated not subsequently but with a paragraph denoting more of Clarissa's thoughts separating the original phrase and the repeated phrase propounds just how much Lady Bruton's snub is haunting Clarissa; despite Clarissa attempting to distract her train of thought, her fixated mind returns to Lady Bruton. In his works, Freud defines fixation as 'instinctual' and 'constituting the basis (of the outcome of) repression' and even specifically refers to the formation of it in his discourses on lesbian delusions of jealousy; hence, the reading of Clarissa as fixated on Lady Bruton only compounds her characterization as that of a repressed paranoiac. Woolf's use of juxtaposition provides additional evidence for this paranoia as the scene progresses and Clarissa walks upstairs. As Clarissa climbs up, reflecting upon Lady Bruton's lack of acknowledgement towards her, she feels 'shriveled, aged, breastless' and 'like a nun', despite the day outside being described as 'soft', '(glowing)' and 'flowering'. These semantic fields, respectively invoking the opposing imagery of aging and youth, yet again emphasize Clarissa's emotions towards Lady Bruton in that the simple act of not being invited to Lady Bruton's luncheon has emotionally aged Clarissa and skewed her perspective of the external world to such an extent. The visceral imagery of old age evoked by the adjectives 'shriveled, aged, breastless' coupled with the employment of a rule of three only intensify this effect and, ultimately, underscore the Freudian interpretation of Clarissa as homosexually repressed and a paranoiac.

Additionally, Clarissa's character can be construed as reflecting the final of Freud's indicators of paranoia— delusions of persecution. Such delusions can be understood as the unconscious transformation of repressed homosexual desire for a same-sex object into the perception of said same-

[5] D. Doner, "Virginia Woolf: The Service of Style," *Modem Fiction Studies,* 2 (1956): pp.7-8.

sex object as a persecutor[6]. Freud expands upon this in 1923, stating this distortion of the beloved into the 'hated persecutor' serves as a 'reactive formation' of the paranoiac against their own repressed sexuality[7]. Clarissa can be interpreted as experiencing delusions of persecution with regards to her relationship to Doris Kilman, especially as it is presented in early novel reflections of Clarissa's; not only does she, within these internal thoughts, introduce us to Miss Kilman by comparing her to Elizabeth's dog Grizzle via zoomorphism ('better poor Grizzle than Miss Kilman'), establishing Clarissa's dislike for her from the outset, but, additionally, Woolf's incessant employment of semicolons in Clarissa's descriptions of Miss Kilman as 'never (being) in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were; (..)' give Clarissa's reflections a sense of fluidity similar to the stream of consciousness narrative method of Woolf's contemporary Joyce. This stream-of-consciousness technique highlights Miss Kilman's dislike for Clarissa whilst simultaneously emphasizing that this dislike is a product of Clarissa's consciousness and hence, to the Freudian reader, could be read as merely a delusion of Clarissa's. Clarissa's subsequent metaphorical references to Miss Kilman as a '(spectre) with which one battles in the night' indirectly liken Miss Kilman to a hallucination, another symptom Freud references in his 1911 study; he refers to 'violent hallucinations as a struggle between repression and an attempt at recovery'[8]. Though, in this context, Freud suggests that experiencing hallucinations is not a paranoiac trait but a paraphrenic trait, he nevertheless propounds hallucinatory distortions as a possible result of homosexual repression. Finally, allusions within Clarissa's mind to different situations in which she 'would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No.', via the short, curt nature of the line's final 'No.', can be interpreted as not reflecting Clarissa's distaste for the idea of

[6] See Freud (1911)

[7] S. Freud, 'Certain Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 4 (1923): pp.1-10.

[8] See Freud (1911)

loving Miss Kilman but, rather, reflecting the forcefulness with which Clarissa wishes to stifle her desire for Miss Kilman.

To conclude, Woolf's depiction of Clarissa's respective relationships with her husband, Lady Bruton and Miss Kilman permit for the Freudian interpretation of Clarissa as a repressed homosexual, exhibiting paranoia in the wake of her repression. In particular, the paranoiac traits of erotomania, delusions of jealousy and delusions of grandeur can be perceived as manifest in Clarissa's character throughout the novel via Woolf's use of an array of literary and structural techniques. I believe this reading of Clarissa, despite the archaic lens with which Freud's writings are now viewed in the field of modern psychology, is especially poignant to readers of today; this interpretation of Clarissa challenges the heterosexist lens with which most readers and academics adopt when approaching canonical texts like Mrs Dalloway and will hopefully encourage a breadth of alternate queer readings of ostensibly heterosexual literature in the future as well as discourage societal heteronormality in general.

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