

Woolf's Social Web

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf illuminates networks of significance by using the imagery and symbolism of threads. Tiny yet powerful imaginary fibers hold her characters interconnected, although none of them can fully perceive these connections. The image of thread is used differently for different characters, reflecting their distinct individual perspectives. Using the symbol of the social web, Woolf makes a statement about the impact of violence on an individual's ability to attach him or herself to the world. Many supporting characters take on significance and meaning because of the social web that connects them. Richard Dalloway experiences his relationships as strands in a spider's web, which can be stretched as well as woven, and connected. Elizabeth Dalloway thinks deeply on her relation to society as a whole as she rides in an omnibus down the Strand (a crowded street which, to her, acts as a "strand" between her and the world), which is simultaneously being looked upon by Septimus Warren Smith—caught on the fringes of society, still he serves as a testament to how interconnected the strings are in the web-like world Woolf spins.

As Richard Dalloway leaves Lady Bruton's house and walks through London, the relationship between the two seems to be an infinitely strong thread. Richard and Hugh Whitbread are described going "further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread... which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one's friends were attached to one's body... by a thin thread..." (Woolf 112). The statement this makes about Richard's relation to the world is that he is bound by miniscule, yet powerful attachments. Woolf embodies these attachments as "a single spider's thread... blotted with rain-drops, and burdened, sag[ging] down," (112) under the weight of time, space, and circumstance. Under the burdens of time and space Richard Dalloway's threads bend and stretch but do not

break. It would also seem that this immensely strong force is what keeps Richard attached to reality, in the sense that it is how he relates to people. As he continues through London, his attachment to Clarissa is described as “a single spider’s thread after wavering here and there attach[ing] itself to the point of a leaf” (114). His connection to Clarissa seems as small as a strand of spider thread, yet the thread is impossibly strong because despite any type of physical or mental distance, he is able to connect to her. Mr. Dalloway seems unaware of these important threads that bind him to the world, but this does not prevent him from navigating the social web.

Elizabeth Dalloway is a young woman becoming an adult, and is just beginning to experience a similar pull to the social world; she decides to try and navigate it on her own while on an omnibus riding down the Strand. “She was delighted to be free,” Woolf narrates (135), and in her freedom it seems as if the Strand becomes a thread like those experienced by her father. As she rides down the street looking at common citizens, “busy about their activities, hands putting stone to stone, minds eternally occupied not with trivial chatterings... but with thoughts of ships, of business, of law, of administration...” (137), she begins to feel connected to them. The feeling is so strong that Elizabeth begins to think she might want to “become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament... all because of the Strand” (136). Perhaps what she desires is to help “the people of the Strand” (common folk), but there is also the possibility that her desires are fueled by the excitement she is experiencing while traveling foreign social “strands” for the first time.

It seems as though Elizabeth has built up her view of the Strand to the point that it holds a deep meaning to her. “[A]ll because of the Strand,” she thinks to herself, as if she may be conscious of the “strands” she is beginning to form to the world. Woolf hints that “strands” or threads are something one can never be fully conscious of, by using the Strand as a hinge to

connect Elizabeth to Septimus Warren Smith. Woolf shows them simultaneously looking upon the same place, yet still completely unaware of one another. So the Strand functions to hold Elizabeth not just to the common people that have inspired her to pursue a career, but also to connect her to Septimus.

The Strand holds no significance to Septimus Warren Smith at all, because he is unable to connect with society. Because of his mental illness he is completely removed from the social world the other characters function in. To him “the light and shadow which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now made the omnibus bright yellow” (139). To him, the Strand isn’t composed of hundreds of people, each with independent lives. To him, the Strand is no different from the wallpaper. However, Septimus is able to experience one brief glimpse of connection in the moments leading up to his death. This connection is to his wife, Lucrezia, and the symbol of connection is Lucrezia’s sewing as she decorates a hat. As she sews on the decorations, the thread seems figuratively to solidify the memory of her attachment to Septimus. Septimus “had become himself then, he had laughed then. They had been alone together. She would like that hat” (145). The hat and the thread are the only things that connect Septimus and Lucrezia. This is the only moment where Septimus’s internal time is actually shared with another individual. As she sews, the thread attaches fabrics and Lucrezia’s attachment towards Septimus is re-knit. They become so close that “she could say anything to him now. She could say whatever came into her head,” (146) while “he could feel her mind...” (147). Despite his inability to connect with people on a socially acceptable level, he is still able to share a very unique, very deep connection, because of this hat Lucrezia was sewing.

Particularly horrifying is that, moments later, Septimus is dead, and it almost seems like it is because “the needle had broken” (146) while Lucrezia was sewing. The thread connecting Septimus to Lucrezia and the rest of the world could never be fully sewn, and after this brief moment of tranquility, “he remembered Bradshaw...said they must be separated” (147). To Septimus, Bradshaw is the breaking needle. Bradshaw keeps Septimus from being able to hold on to Lucrezia, the only person he can attach himself to, and so Septimus kills himself. The thread and needle in this moment are so powerful they are the difference between being able to hold on to life the world and death.

All of these characters live in a world of immensely powerful imaginary social fibers. Richard is bound to the world though spider web-like threads. It is clear he is completely unaware of them, yet he still has the ability to navigate his social world-web. His daughter, Elizabeth, experiences a social web of threads in the form of the Strand. There is a point where it seems the “strands” that connect her to the world nearly come fully to her consciousness. However, Woolf makes it clear, through juxtaposing Septimus’s view of the Strand at the exact same moment, that no person can be entirely aware of the indirect “strands” that connect them to others. Like Richard, Septimus is completely unconscious of threads to the world, and like Elizabeth, Septimus can never fully grasp his connection to the world, but for completely different reasons than those of the Dalloways. Septimus cannot navigate the minuscule threads that connect him to the world, because the War, his mental illness, and William Bradshaw have destroyed all of his threads. The death of Septimus Warren Smith is a testament to result of violence on an individual’s ability to be fully entwined in the reality of a social web.