In Mrs. Dalloway there is much concern about the implications of seeing and being seen in terms of individual’s conduct in public life. Aside from the more general concerns about social status and class there is also a certain anxiety about the conclusions people will draw from witnessing private affairs aired in public spaces.

**Interruptions and Circular Conversation**

The style of much Victorian-era conversation is rife with attempts to erect barriers between the public and private lives of various individuals. This is best reflected and achieved through the use of interruptions and euphemistic dialogue. The characters in Mrs. Dalloway are no exception to this communicative style.

For example, the first encounter after many years apart between Clarissa and Peter is interrupted just as their discussion is about to reach frank terms. Woolf describes Peter as “seizing her by the shoulders” (Woolf 46) while demanding to know if Clarissa is truly happy with Richard. This plea is interrupted, however, by the entrance of Clarissa’s daughter, Elizabeth. Immediately following this, Woolf describes Peter in much more closed-off terms as “stuffing his handkerchief into his pocket” and “going to quickly to her” to say goodbye before practically “running downstairs and opening the hall door” (Woolf 47).

Following his abrupt exit, Clarissa follows him to the street where she is reduced to shouting out the door her sentiment for him to return: “Remember my party tonight!” while her voice is “thin and frail” as it is “overwhelmed by traffic and the sound of all the clocks striking” (Woolf 47).

**Rezia and Septimus**

While there are many examples of interruptions and concern over public perception, the relationship of Rezia and Septimus is a special case. In addition to the normal anxiety over keeping firm control over the public and private spheres of life, this couple also must struggle with the specter of mental illness.

During their walk in the park, Rezia becomes struck with fear that the mere thought that other people might realize that Septimus is having an episode. As her husband suffers an unprompted outburst she rapidly surveys the city around them, fretting that “people must notice; people must see” (Woolf 15). Similarly, her response to Septimus’ episode in the park is not to discuss it with him while they are in public. Instead, she strives to remove him from the public sphere entirely: “Away from people---” she thinks, “they must get away from people...” (Woolf 24).

It is also important to note that Septimus’ annoyance with Rezia at this juncture is premised entirely on the nature of her interruption not on their interactions in the public sphere.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Septimus’ annoyance with Rezia is almost entirely premised on her continual interruptions during his moments of ‘madness’. Are Woolf’s opinions about mental health and Victorian society represented by interactions such as these? Why or why not?

2. What other examples are there of concern for public perception in Mrs. Dalloway? Could the entire structure of Clarissa Dalloway’s day be said to be dictated by these concerns?

(HOME)