

Mrs. Dalloway and the Semiotics of a First Sentence

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Abstract. How does fiction work? How can mere words create realities that exist only in the mind of the writer and the reader, yet seem so tangible in their realness? How can the first sentence of a novel transport one into a very real, yet purely objective, world — literally word-by-word? How do the subjective worlds of the writer and readers interact with the words on the page to create similar, yet always highly individualized, objective worlds? How can semiotics function as a means to analyzing a written text in order to answer these questions about how the processes of writing and reading work? These, amongst others, are the questions explored in this paper, “*Mrs. Dalloway* and the Semiotics of a First Sentence”. In it I analyze Virginia Woolf’s classic novel from a semiotic stance. Through exploring the semiotics of the novel’s first sentence, I attempt to show how we can read even the first nine words of a book and find ourselves transported to a whole, new, highly detailed world — the world of fiction.

Keywords: infinite semiosis, Mrs. Galloway, purely objective reality, reader(s), writer(s), Virginia Woolf

Words, which allow us to express our concepts to one another in species-specifically human linguistic communication, are what separate us from the rest of the animal kingdom. String some words together and you have a sentence. Communication of a distinctively human sort is now possible. Words linked together are at the heart of what makes language work. Language is at the heart of what makes us semiotic animals. As Neils Bohr once said,¹ “We are suspended in language in such a way that we cannot say what is up and what is down.” Words are Homo sapiens’ use of culturally accepted signs to describe the world around them. Out of them grew a complex system of signs that enables us to communicate complex concepts to one another. Perhaps the most sign-laden aspect of language is found in the world of fiction. A writer puts some symbols down on a piece of paper that elucidate that writer’s mental representations to another, who then creates another complex system of signs that, for the written words’ interpreter, take on a whole new set of ideas and impressions, similar, but different from, the writer’s own concepts.

As semiotic animals, each of us uses words as sign vehicles to communicate with one another. Words are what raise us above the brute animals. Yet each of us is ultimately locked within ourselves. Nobody can truly explain his or her exact mental concepts to anyone else. We try, by utilizing language in the form of sentences; but try hard as we can, miscommunication happens. The other person impresses their own mental concepts on

¹ As cited in Sebeok 1994: 5.

the signs our words have become for them, in an interpretation which is always at least slightly different from our own interpretation of them. My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor is it likely that my thoughts will ever be truly understood once verbalized or written down. Hence, all literature, all history, all philosophy, et al, is always open to further interpretation.

Yet this fickle retinue of words is one of the few tools we are given to express complex concepts. Words are the set of signs that allow us to write down what our imaginative power creates in our minds: fiction. Put some words together into a sentence and complex concepts such as imaginary worlds can spring into existence. *Mrs. Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf, is a masterpiece of the 21st century novel. It has been a much-discussed piece of fiction throughout the last 90 years, but it is not its power as a piece of literature that I will discuss here. Most pertinent to my discussion of semiotics is what she is reported to have said when the novel finally jelled in her mind. “Leonard, I have a first sentence.”

200,000 or more years ago, a whole new species of animal, *Homo sapiens sapiens* appeared on the earth. They evolved from other primates, but there was a fundamental difference. With *Homo sapiens* came the ability not only to think in concepts, but then to communicate those concepts to others within a context of linguistic syntax. The human animals came from a lineage that was certainly able to express themselves via nonverbal signs, as all living creatures do, but they gained the evolutionary advantage of being able to express themselves syntactically via verbal signs: language. Maritain states (1957: 52–54, italic added) that “what defines language is not precisely the use of words, or even of conventional signs; it is the use of any sign whatsoever as involving the knowledge or awareness of the *relation of signification* ... it is the use of signs in so far as it manifests that the mind has grasped and brought out the relation of signification.” A world of unlimited semiosis was formed. Or to paraphrase Merrell:² if a bunch of flowers and the idea of a bunch of flowers are separate, then there is a relation between them, and therefore an idea of this relation, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

The words our ancient ancestors used to label the objects they became aware of, for example the flowers they found growing in the woods or fields around them, were made possible because they were semiotic animals: animals that are able not only to register the items around them as signs, but also able to internalize those signs in the form of concepts syntactically organizable, and then communicate them to others of their species. Signs — things that, according to Peirce, are able to “signify in act” — are utilized by all animals, but only semiotic animals are able to use them consciously as signs. It is such conscious use of signs that allows language to develop and complex linguistic communication to occur, including the lie. As semiotic animals, our ancestors could create and share purely objective worlds with one another via signs. These were worlds that never had physical existence and would never have physical existence. They were worlds created relationally by concepts alone, always to remain conceptual. These worlds were created by the imaginative

² Cf. Deely 2009a: 100.

powers. The fictional narrative was born. Words opened up the world accessible to the storyteller and allowed them to create nonphysical, yet fixed, worlds they could share with other semiotic animals.

Our distant ancestors took this process of infinite semiosis one step further when they created written codes, made up of symbols, that stood for the sounds that they used to express the natural world and their innermost concepts of self-identity as based upon that world. When, some 150,000 years after *Homo sapiens* began to roam the earth, they acquired the skill of creating written codes to correspond to the verbal sounds they used to communicate, communication via the written word became possible. With this advance in their ability to work with signs a whole new world of possibilities opened up as the personal, objective *Innenwelt* was now expressible, via the code of written language, as a culturally explicit *Umwelt*. The written word had emerged. With this the semiotic animal came into a new fullness, now able to create and use both verbal and written signs in order to communicate with one another. They gained the ability to express their wonder at themselves and the world around them with words. The written words, in the form of a code, became the method in which the *Innenwelt* of one of them could be shared and become part of another’s *Innenwelt*, without any restrictions on the time or space between the two individuals. Codified signs allowed fiction to happen on a level that was free from the necessary here-and-now, private world of verbal communication.

All such codes are based upon the natural world. Yet the symbols they are made up of have little or nothing to do with the physical realities they express. As Deely defines it (2009a: 92):

The code is the correlation and proportioning of a sensibly accessible element to an objectivity that is understood as correlated thereto. The idea must be correlated with some physical element within experience that is taken to serve as ground for the relation in which the idea expressly consists.

Words, as codes, stand as signs for the natural world around us from which all ideas are pulled. Words are not the natural world, but they are culled from the world of nature. Yet they have no existence besides that of relation. They are related to something else, not due to any physical correspondence between the word and the thing it signifies, but due to a purely arbitrary decision that this word stands for that thing as decided by a specific culture. Thereby they become, as codes, the basis upon which the world can become a shared experience amongst members of that culture.

Words, the defining difference separating *Homo sapiens* from the so-called brute animals, are shared, cultural phenomena. If two people are trying to communicate and they don’t share a common language (say one is American and the other is Thai), they would both see the same bunch of flowers, laying on the same table, but wouldn’t be able to express that concept to one another (apart from what they could communicate via non-verbal signs, which, if one is communicating about flowers, are limited, at best). Words are complex things. A word is a stipulated sign, a part of a species-specific human process of semiosis. As John Deely

relates it (2009a: 100), a stipulated sign is formed in the following way:

Once the relation of signification has been grasped on its own, as distinct from a particular object signifying another particular object signified, it becomes possible to detach that relation from any particular objective sign vehicle and, taking this invisible content itself as the basis for further representations, to attach it, instead, to some other object. This other object will now serve as ground for a relation originally grounded elsewhere. With the possibility of such a choice, a new kind of sign and a new mode of signifying comes into existence objectively, the *stipulable* sign.

The stipulable sign ‘flowers’ has been agreed upon, in English, to stand for the things that make up a bouquet. The word ‘flowers’ stipulates what fills the vase standing on the table. Deely has stated (*ibid.*: 100) that “the essence of language is arguably equatable with the discovery of the relation of signification and the consequent reconstitution of experienced signs as stipulatable.” It is because we are able to use words to stipulate objects and things that language, in the form of words, allows us to communicate with one another. The words themselves stand for something to us. They are signs of something that they bear no physical resemblance to. They are arbitrarily defined by cultures to stand for something other than themselves, to stipulate something else. This is the phenomenon of language.

In their use of words, all members of a shared culture have agreed, first, that a particular set of sounds will stand for the bouquet of multicolored, smelly things on the table; then said members have created individual sign vehicles in the form of symbols — an alphabet, to stand for the multiple sounds that make up a word. Sebeok says (1994: 33) that the sign we call a symbol is “A sign without similarity or contiguity, but only with a conventional link between its signifier and its denotata, and with an intentional class for its designatum...”. Therefore ‘flowers’ (a word that in the English language stands for a multitude of different varieties of plants with petals, all of which have only a passing resemblance to one another) becomes a sign vehicle for the objects represented by the fluffy things on the table, its denotata. It also becomes the signifier all English-speakers culturally agree on to represent these things on the table.

Words are the names we have given the things and objects of the *ens reale* world in which we find ourselves. Sebeok defines the sign known as ‘name’ as “a sign which has an extensional class for its designatum.” The name ‘flowers’ is a sign standing for the type of plants mentioned above. Or it can get more specific and someone can say ‘garden flowers of England’, which brings to mind the concept of certain types of flowers which flourish in the cool, humid climate there. Or I can say ‘my flowers’ and the name becomes even more specific, coming to mean a particular patch in my garden here in Houston. Or I can refer to ‘those flowers’, by which I mean that bunch of flowers on the table in the corner of the room. As this cycle has been repeated throughout history, ‘flowers’ has become a name culturally loaded with centuries of meaning. It is a

name that, for the individuals who use it, has come to be built up of deep layers of significance. It becomes all the flowers that a given individual has ever seen.

Then someone, say Virginia Woolf, writes down the set of symbols that stand for the name ‘flowers’ in the first sentence of *Mrs. Dalloway* and, all of a sudden, a completely non-*ens reale* bouquet, a thing that has never and will never exist physically, is able to travel the world, find the codes and stipulated signs that correspond to it in other cultures, and bring alive Virginia’s personal vision for anyone who bothers to pick up the book and read the first sentence (Woolf 1925: 3): “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” Via the wonder of translation Mrs. Dalloway’s flowers can then be seen, as equally as brilliant in Thailand as in America. Yet every individual reader’s bouquet will be different in some ways, because the profound thing about words is that they stand for the concepts integrated within each interpreter, and, as no two individuals are wholly alike, so no two readings are the same in the details they evoke. All flowers are things, but only certain flowers are objects within the sensory perception of an observer. Thus the bouquet in Thailand (where growing conditions are not conducive to peonies flourishing) would probably not include peonies, whereas someone living in Colorado (where peonies flourish due to the cold climate) might, perhaps, include peonies. As Eco says (1977: 31), “From one speaker to another there can be differences in the complexity of semantic analysis of a term: these differences produce sub-codes on the basis of which one speaker could assign meanings to the terms which other speakers would not assign to them.” In fact, Mrs. Dalloway’s flowers might look different to me upon the first reading than they do on the second (say, once on a vacation I’d seen a field of sunflowers in France), and yet again different on the third reading (once I’d started growing a subtropical garden of my own), and so on. In other words, the first time I read the book, say due to a recent trip to Colorado, my bouquet might have peonies in it; another time, due to my recent attendance at a friend’s wedding, it might be exclusively made up of white roses. This sign then brings forth any number of different flowers I have experienced within my lifetime of contact with the natural world. I, without particularly thinking about it, preconsciously, as it were, choose a set of signs that represent individual types of flowers to become the bouquet that Mrs. Dalloway will buy.

Perhaps a more apt example is Mrs. Dalloway herself. In the following paragraph, and indeed throughout the book as a whole, Woolf never describes Clarissa Dalloway’s physical attributes. The beauty in this is that it truly brings our imaginative powers into full force, as all good literature does. We must create every detail of Clarissa Dalloway for ourselves. She is a sign, which is both universal (Clarissa Dalloway as a well-known character in Virginia Woolf’s book) and highly personal (my concept, here and now, of Clarissa, a thirty year old woman in a sky blue and white dress with long blonde hair tucked up into a bun and a wide-brimmed organza hat on her head), as well as Virginia Woolf’s original concept of Mrs. Dalloway (the details of which are lost to us, due the lack of details defining Clarissa, physically, in the book). Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway has set into motion a series of triadic relationships with her concepts as a writer, which progress to the sign or

words she has written down, which, when internalized by the reader, stand for concepts that relate back to, but are different from, Woolf's original idea of Mrs. Dalloway in its particulars, which yet bring us back around to where our idea of flowers meets up with Woolf's. As word after word is read, triadic relations build upon each other and grow. Woolf takes her purely objective reality (that reality based upon her imagination) and, via language, turns it into numerous objective realities that create an Umwelt (a culturally shared experience of the environment) that she can then share with others.

Signs always operate within a triadic relationship to one another. In the case of Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf writes a book, I read it, and Clarissa and her flowers jump into full bloom from a concept in my mind. From this a narrative follows, as symbols multiply on the page as fast as Virginia can write them down. But prior to this there was another triadic relation between Virginia and her idea of 'flowers' as drawn from the flowers she had experienced via nature and culture. There is also the triadic relationship between the reader, the word 'flowers', and my own personal idea of Mrs. Dalloway's flowers.

Thus a piece of literature is a vast sea of triadic relations between the writer, the written word, and the reader; but the narrative can only exist due to a triadic relationship between the writer, the reader and the mental concept of 'flowers', which then gives rise to another triadic relationship between myself, the word on the pages and my mental idea of Mrs. Dalloway's flowers. The narrative could never exist without our culturally accepted awareness of the signs we draw from the vast world of nature. Narrative was one of our first forms of communication. When Homer wrote *The Iliad*, he was simply placing on paper his own version of a narrative that had been passed down orally for perhaps hundreds of years.

Deely has suggested (2009a: 5) that the "universal role of narrative" can be seen as "the root of the transmission of culture". A narrative is based on the world of nature, in that it is from the agreed upon words for natural phenomena that writers create a new, purely objective world of their own. Even at the level of science fiction, the signs of the natural world must still be drawn upon to describe the (supposedly) nonexistent alien. He is green, like fresh mown grass; his head is bulbous on top and pointed at the bottom, like an ant; his arms and legs are long and spindly, like those of a praying mantis, and so on, until the writer has drawn a picture of the alien that the reader can visualize because its elements are taken directly from the natural world, which is what words were originally invented to express.

Words are at the root of what makes the transmission of culture possible, and narratives consist of a great number of signs that we have culled from nature in order to communicate with one another. Fictions are narratives that are created by the imaginative power of a writer. Nature provides the raw materials from which a fictional narrative can arise. Flowers exist in books because flowers exist in nature. Without the original connection to flowers as objects known to us from the natural world and culturally symbolized by the word 'flowers' (at least to a reader from an English-speaking country), flowers in novels couldn't exist, and narratives about bouquets of flowers would lie mute.

Clarissa Dalloway existed first as the object of an idea in Virginia Woolf’s head, a unique idea, different from any idea that anyone has ever had or ever will have. Woolf’s concept of Mrs. Dalloway existed before she ever wrote down the sentence (1925: 3): “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.” Once this sentence was written down and read by the first proofreader, Clarissa Dalloway existed as a completely different concept in the mind of someone other than her creator. She took on a life of her own. It is a unique element of language that it is capable of creating something that never existed before, thereby making it real to another. As Deely says (2009a: 21), “the single most decisive and striking feature of human language [is] ... its power to convey the nonexistent with a facility every bit equal to its power to convey thought about what is existent.”

Once the book was published, reader after reader created more personally unique ‘Mrs. Dalloways’, ad nauseum. It is an existence that began as Virginia Woolf’s idea of a fictional character, Mrs. Dalloway, which then creates a non-existent, purely mental construct, the fictive Clarissa Dalloway, which is interpreted by Woolf and then recreated with words, sign vehicles that signify, on a page, so that a third factor in the relationship, an interpreter’s idea of Mrs. Dalloway, now with an existence of her own, might exist as a recreation of Woolf’s concept. Other interpreters come along, create their own highly individualized existence for Mrs. Dalloway, thereby engendering even more relations spinning out from Woolf’s original concept. Fiction is open ended. It sends out spider webs of images that, upon being read in Thailand, vary from the images it creates when read in America, but in all cases remain connected to Woolf’s initial idea of Mrs. Dalloway. A piece of fiction is an enormous web of relations, ever expanding, stopping only at the point where no one reads the book any longer. Within the covers of a book is a world that didn’t exist prior to being written down. It is a world built on relations. All these relations, resembling but different from one another, began when Virginia put pen to paper in 1925.

To write a story is to play with images, ideas and words in one’s head. This is what is meant by Peirce’s coinage of the word ‘musement’. As Peirce describes the process (1908a: CP 460–461), it is necessary to “Enter your skiff of Musement, push off into the lake of thought, and leave the breathe of heaven to swell your sail. With your eyes open, awake to what is about or within you, and open conversation with yourself; for such is all meditation.” The composing of a story is a type of meditation in the mind of the writer. Once words have hit the page, the writer’s musements can be shared with others. Writers create by musing. They play with mental images, construct characters, settings, and plots, and then put this imaginary world down on paper. In this way, an author’s musements become set at the time of their being written down, and yet the interpretation of these musements becomes both timeless and infinite in the spiral of semiosis. Imaginary worlds, born out of a writer’s time set aside to muse on things, thereby take on a concrete aspect. Then, starting the spiral of infinite semiosis, the writer’s private musings are published and become public domain.

“Mrs. Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself.” With this minimalistic sentence Virginia

Woolf creates a purely objective world that bursts forth with all the force of a world that comes to existence in actuality in the mind of the reader. How is it that one sentence can create a purely objective world, a world with no physical existence, which yet feels so vibrant and real. The fact that this world explodes in our consciousness with a simple sentence, deplete of descriptive adjectives, has to do with Woolf's superior abilities as a writer; but the bursting forth itself goes beyond that, and speaks of any number of mind-dependent worlds that have been created in myriad volumes of fiction.

How can something with no materiality come to exist for someone else via mere words? What brings the immaterial to life? As Deely has stated (2009a: 22): "The problem [is] how we talk about nonexistent things, where nonexistent means nonexistent in the physical sense...". The answer to the former questions can be found in the process of semiosis: the action of signs as it applies to the world of language and ideas. As individuals, we are exposed to our own world of signs from the moment of birth. As we mature, the body of signs we have to work with expands and our capacity to form complex ideas grows with it. Eventually we begin to speak and understand the speech of those around us. As this capacity grows, we are able to create from fiction worlds which are comprised from the body of signs that we have in our repertoire. This is why the narratives created for children are so much more simplistic than those created for adults. A child's use of signs is limited to the ideas that they have internalized concerning the natural and cultural world around them. An adult has a greater body of experience with the world, and thus the number of signs they have to work with is greater. Maritain (1957: 53) explains the process by which ideas are formed thus:

Normally in the development of a child it is necessary that the idea be "enacted" by the senses and lived through before it is born as an idea; it is necessary that the relationship of signification should first be actively *exercised*... in a sensory sign bound up with the desire that is to be expressed. *Knowing* this relationship of signification will come later, and will have to be the *idea* ... of that which is signified. Animals and children make use of this signification; they do not perceive it. When the child begins to perceive it... at that moment the idea has emerged.

By the time adulthood is reached, the ability to create an inner world, based on the manipulation of sign vehicles in order to create a potentially infinite number of ideas, has become established.

Fiction works, makes the nonmaterial world of the book real for the reader, because of the interaction of signs that we have internalized with the body of signs that writers use to create their fictive worlds. All adults have in their heads a concept of 'flowers'. This idea of 'flowers' interacts in a triadic relationship between the signs the writer utilizes and writes down as words on a page, and the words the reader absorbs, which brings up their own system of signs connected to their concept of 'flowers'. The relationship exists between the writer's concepts, the words on the page, and the readers imprinting of their own body of signs upon the words

used to create a purely objective, nonmaterial reality; but, as Deely has pointed out (2009b: 23): “Of course relations may not be in the order of *ens reale* at all. Relations as ‘between’ subjects may simply result from comparisons made by some mind — our own, say — when two subjects are considered together.” As each word is read the relation of signs thus transmitted increases, until, by the end of the novel, an entire new world exists in the mind of the reader — a purely objective world made possible by the signs stored in the reader’s mind corresponding to the signs used by the writer. Thus a new, purely objective world, existent only for the mind of the reader, is achieved by the writer’s use of signs. Inasmuch as these signs correspond to the natural world the reader has already absorbed as a system of signs, the reader is able in turn to create “something out of nothing” via the correspondence of this body of signs with those of the writer. A relation first exists between the writer, the natural world, and the signification of the words written on the page. These words are then read by another, who then connects these culturally agreed upon symbols with a second relation between the world of nature as known by the reader, the reader’s subsequent concepts brought on by the symbols on the page, and the readers highly personalized concepts of the immaterial, yet fully existent, world created by the writer. One relation leads to another in an ongoing spiral of semiosis as the reader continues to process each word of the story, building up the purely objective, but now actual, world for the mind of the reader with an ever extending fictitious world, until the symbols reach their finale and the story is over. Mrs. Dalloway’s world consists of a linked chain of signs that we can relate to as a ‘real’, yet purely objective, reality.

The existence of Mrs. Dalloway, as put forth by Woolf in the book, is a purely objective reality about a purely objective reality. It is, after that first sentence, a story based mainly on the thoughts of Clarissa Dalloway. It is a book of ideas about ideas. What Woolf has done is show that what makes us up as individuals is almost purely based on our thoughts. For the rest of the story, the reader is shown the world mainly through the eyes of Mrs. Dalloway. It is told from the point of view of her personal *Innenwelt* or inner concept of reality. We, as readers, internalize Clarissa’s ideas and make them a part of our own individual *Innenwelt*.

So what does that first sentence tell us? How does it mold the purely objective reality that Clarissa’s life becomes for us? What do the words as signs stand for when unraveled from one another? The first sentence of a story opens up a whole new world for the reader, who then links the ideas brought up by the signs, in this case ten words, into the larger concept that is the first sentence. This in turn opens up the door that leads us into the fictive reality — the purely awareness-dependent world of the writer’s mind — where we can apply meaning to these signs in order to create our own, totally objective (nonexistent in the world independent of our minds) reality that opens the door to the purely objective reality of the book. So what does Virginia’s first sentence tell us?

“Mrs. Dalloway said that she would get the flowers herself.” Let’s break the sentence up into the ideas that the words, via the long route of the history of their use, signify. We shall begin at the beginning with ‘Mrs.’. ‘Mrs.’ is an anomaly in the English language; it is a word that throughout the history of its usage has had only

one highly limited meaning. A 'Mrs.' is a married female. With one small word a wealth of associations is revealed. The reader now knows that a person, not, say, a cat, is being spoken of. The reader knows that this person is female and that this female is married. Here, with one word, the reader has entered a detailed world. If the reader is a married female, perhaps there is an instant sense of relatedness to the character, colored by the reader's own happiness, or lack thereof, within the state of matrimony. If the reader is a divorced female, an instant sense of aversion might follow. If the reader is male, he might think of his mother, or his wife, or the married woman at the office he's been fantasizing about recently.

Now, let us move on to the second word: 'Dalloway'. The reader now knows that this woman is probably American or British, although where she is located is still a mystery. The reader's opinions towards Americans or Brits now comes into play and puts a new tinge on the world that is opening up before our eyes. Then on to the third word: 'said'. Ah, now this American or British married woman is animate. She has spoken. The character has come to life and has a past, although whether she is alive still, at the telling of the story, is still a question. (Although time, in the world of literature, has a rather indeterminate aspect to it. The world of a novel always has an existence now, as it is being read, only to be truly regarded in the past tense after it has been read through and put away.) Still, Mrs. Dalloway is vibrant, alive, has spoken.

Now the word 'that', the reader preps to find out what it is she has to say about herself. Now 'she': Mrs. Dalloway has spoken about herself. Has she spoken to someone else, or is the author having her speak about herself as a way to further define who she is? Quickly follows the word 'would'. Mrs. Dalloway is about to do something again. In an instantaneous flash, the reader wonders what it is she will do.

'Buy': Mrs. Dalloway is going shopping. Now the reader knows that she has some means of income. Followed by 'the'. She is buying one thing, not many. It's a brief errand she's going on, but what will she buy? Is she a woman of means, perhaps off to buy something frivolous, or is she a beggar, buying a scrap of bread with her last dime? There is a moment of anticipation, as the reader wonders what kind of a woman this Mrs. Dalloway is. Exactly what is it that she is going to buy? Then, much to the reader's relief, the word 'buy' is followed by the word 'flowers', and the doors into the world of Mrs. Dalloway open up.

The reader now knows that she is not a pauper, that she is actually well off enough to afford flowers when she wants them.

Now: 'herself'. This Mrs. Dalloway figure is now seen to be well off but capable of doing her own errands. She must often have someone else do her errands, as she has seen the need to announce that she would do them herself today. There's a certain level of control over her environment exhibited here. Buying flowers is an errand that entails a certain amount of creativity, and she would like to control the impression these flowers will make on whomever will see them, or perhaps she's bored and simply wants to get out of the house. Mrs. Dalloway's world is now open-ended, but firmly cemented in the here and now of fiction. There are any number of possibilities, concerning the psychological make up of this woman, now present. There are an infinite

number of options concerning the errand she is about to run. With this first sentence now read, the world of the book becomes possible. The book now has a form.

The next word sets the stage for the entire rest of the novel: ‘today’. The reader is here, now, in Mrs. Dalloway’s present and presence. The world of the novel has opened up in full bloom. In less than ten seconds, for the average reader, a concept that informs the whole of the book has manifested itself. Ten simple signs strung together have caused an effect upon the reader, and the world of the novel has begun.

So how is it possible that Virginia Woolf can paint such a vivid picture for the reader, using so few words. It has to do with the phenomenon of communication itself. Deely states (2009a: 50): “Communication is possible in exactly the same way that any two things can be related to a common third.” I read the words ‘Mrs. Dalloway’, which are what I share in common with Woolf, and, from her original idea, which resulted in the words on the page, comes my idea of Mrs. Dalloway, which has come to me as a result of the words on the page. My idea of Mrs. Dalloway results in a projection of Clarissa that extends from the idea, yet is separate from it, as it has now become an objective experience of Mrs. Dalloway that is separate from the idea itself: the representamen. This previous is true because my ideas are exclusively mine, just as Virginia’s ideas were unique to her. They are individual representamens, which, by default, are always highly personalized. Deely (2009a: 49) states that “Ideas in our minds are representamens, but representamens *of something besides themselves*, something irreducibly other. This ‘something besides’ the idea is the object of the representation. The connection between the two, idea and object, is a pure relation.” The representamens thus have allowed Woolf to communicate down through the years, in fact after her death, based on my ability to read her words, draw an idea from them and create a representamen that then produces a pure relation that lives on for me as the reader even after Woolf no longer physically exists. Relations have the queer attribute of being able to extend the realm of the dead into the world of the living. The representatems carry their worlds into ours.

In the first sentence of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the interpretant is the meaning assigned by the reader to the words that make up the sentence. The interpretant is both purely objective and highly individualized. It can be thought of as the mental image or idea that the sentence brings to the mind of the reader. In a letter to Lady Welby (in Hardwick 1977: 83), Peirce says: “I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant. ... Its Interpretant is all that the Sign conveys...”

The effect of the first sentence upon its reader is a mental image of Mrs. Dalloway announcing that she will buy the flowers today. The signs, in this case the words, all have their unique associations for the reader, utilizing, as their object, something from that individual’s subjective life, such as the reader’s mental impressions of married women and the varying types of flowers that the individual has been visually introduced to during the course of a lifetime of experiences with flowers. The interpretant is that which allows us to draw meaning from the list of signs that make up the sentence. It uses the reader’s memorative power to draw up

feelings about married women or to pull forth images of flowers. The interpretant gives the sentence its unique meaning for each individual that reads it. Thus Woolf's original concept now replicates itself via signs, but with an indefinite range of variant interpretations. The word 'flowers' has become the interpretant that stands for a mental representation of the idea of flowers as related to the idea of all flowers. Deely says that "what is essential to a [sign] as interpretant is that it be the ground upon which the sign is seen to be related to something else as signified, which signified in turn becomes a sign relative to other elements in the experience of the interpreter, setting in motion the chain of interpretants on which semiosis as a process feeds." The interpretant, which consists of the written word 'flowers', becomes the basis upon which each of our individual concepts of flowers is signified. Over the course of time, the objective realities brought forth from that one word can extend until infinity, objective reality after objective reality, all varying, in one degree or another, from the original fictive reality experienced by Woolf. It is like an accordion door opening out into infinity.

Like the frame of a house, a writer creates a framework for us upon which to impose our own individual experiences. How ambiguous this house is depends upon the style of the writer. Some houses are, through the writer's use of defining adjectives, definitely modern or Tudor in style, while others, like the framework of Clarissa Dalloway's existence, are more bare, minimal, left up to our interpretation. This house that the writer has built for us consists entirely of the action of signs. In fiction, signs create each other indefinitely in an ongoing semiotic spiral. Literature is composed exclusively of signs. Via concepts, interpretants, representaments, codes and signs in general, the purely objective reality of a book is formed. From musings, a whole new world is constructed, a structure built solely in the writer's own purely objective reality. This reality is the perfect example of what separates us from brutes in our capacities as semiotic animals. We can create, via the action of signs, a communicable reality based solely on the concepts of our minds. We can open the doors to a whole new world merely by writing down a first sentence and handing it to someone else to read.

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