

*This passage is set at Clarissa's party. Sir William Bradshaw, Septimus's doctor, and Lady Bradshaw explain why they are late, and Clarissa feels like withdrawing for a while.*

What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party – the Bradshaws talked of death. He had killed himself – but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window.

Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes<sup>1</sup>. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. But why had he done it? And the Bradshaws talked of it at her party!

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine<sup>2</sup>, never anything more. But he had flung it away<sup>3</sup>. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally<sup>4</sup>), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed<sup>5</sup> about with chatter, defaced<sup>6</sup>, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death.

But this young man who had killed himself – had he plunged<sup>7</sup> holding his treasure? 'If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy<sup>8</sup>,' she had said to herself once, coming down, in white.

Or there were the poets and thinkers. Suppose he had had that passion, and had gone to Sir William Bradshaw, a great doctor, yet to her obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage – forcing your soul, that was it – if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now), Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?

Then (she had felt it only this morning) there was the terror; the overwhelming<sup>9</sup> incapacity, one's parents giving it into one's hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear. Even now, quite often if Richard had not been there reading the *Times*, so that she could crouch<sup>10</sup> like a bird and gradually revive, send roaring up<sup>11</sup> that immeasurable delight, rubbing stick to stick<sup>12</sup>, one thing with another, she must have perished. She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself.

Somehow it was her disaster – her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered<sup>13</sup>. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success, – Lady Bexborough and the rest of it. And once she had walked on the terrace at Bourton.

Odd, incredible; she had never been so happy. Nothing could be slow enough; nothing last too long. No pleasure could equal, she thought, straightening<sup>14</sup> the chairs, pushing in one book on the shelf, this having done with<sup>15</sup> the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight, as the sun rose, as the day sank. Many a time had she gone, at Bourton when they were all talking, to look at the sky; or seen it between people's shoulders at dinner; seen it in London when she could not sleep. She walked to the window.

It held, foolish as the idea was, something of her own in it, this country sky, this sky above Westminster. She parted the curtains; she looked. Oh, but how surprising! – in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her! She was going to bed. And the sky. It will be a solemn sky, she had thought, it will be a dusky sky, turning away its cheek in beauty. But there it was – ashen<sup>16</sup> pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds<sup>17</sup>. It was new to her. The wind must have risen. She was going to bed, in the room opposite. It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window. Could she see her? It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed alone. She pulled the blind<sup>18</sup> now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun<sup>19</sup>. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living. The clock was striking. The leaden circles<sup>20</sup> dissolved in the air. But she must go back. She must assemble<sup>21</sup>. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room.

- 1 through him ... spikes. Le punte arrugginite lo avevano trapassato e feriti
- 2 the Serpentine. Laghetto in Hyde Park, a Londra.
- 3 he had flung it away. Aveva gettato via tutto.
- 4 of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally. Bourton era la casa in cui Clarissa era cresciuta, Peter e Sally da amici di gioventù.
- 5 wreathed. Sfigurata.
- 6 defaced. Sfigurata.
- 7 had he plunged. Si era buttato giù.
- 8 If it were ... most happy. Citazione dall'*Otello* di Shakespeare.
- 9 overwhelming. Opprimente, schiacciante
- 10 crouch. Rannicchiarsi.
- 11 send roaring up. Esaltarsi
- 12 rubbing stick to stick. Sfregando un rametto contro un altro (si riferiva alla sensazione di creare fuoco).
- 13 She had ... pilfered. Aveva tramato, aveva rubacchiato

- 14 straightening. Raddrizzando.
- 15 having done with. Averla finita con.
- 16 ashen. Cinereo, livido.
- 17 raced over ... clouds. Percorso velocemente da grandi nuvole affusolate.
- 18 blind. Tenda, persiana.
- 19 Fear ... the sun. Citazione dal *Cimbelino* di Shakespeare.
- 20 The leaden circles. I circoli plumbei.
- 21 She must assemble. Doveva riunirsi agli altri.

**1 READ** the text and match the highlighted nouns with their meaning.

- 1 intimacy \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 a dull sound as of a heavy fall \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 intense sexual desire \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 challenge, resistance \_\_\_\_\_
- 5 loss of respect or honour \_\_\_\_\_
- 6 delight, ecstasy \_\_\_\_\_
- 7 act of cruelty that offends the feelings \_\_\_\_\_
- 8 a rapid talk about unimportant things \_\_\_\_\_

**5 FOCUS** on the figure of Clarissa Dalloway and write down:

- 1 her reaction to the news;
- 2 what she sees out of the window;
- 3 what she hears;
- 4 what she resolves to do.

➤ **COMPETENCE:**  
ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT

**6 UNDERLINE** Clarissa's thoughts about the present and her thoughts about the past with different colours.

**7 CONSIDER** lines 1-36 and underline the parts of the text in which Clarissa responds to experience by translating her emotions into physical metaphors, which become indistinguishable from the emotions themselves.

**8 EXPLAIN** what kind of relationship there is between Clarissa and her husband. Quote from the text.

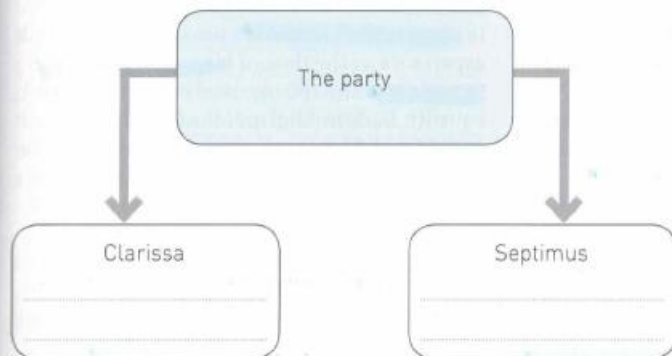
**9 CONSIDER** the party as the climax of the novel, one of those 'moments of being' when the character can grasp the reality behind appearances. What does Clarissa realise? What brings about this realisation?

**11 FOCUS** on the description of the suicide. Identify the poetic devices used.

- Line 5 \_\_\_\_\_
- Line 5 \_\_\_\_\_
- Line 6 \_\_\_\_\_
- Line 6 \_\_\_\_\_

**10 MATCH** the terms of the oppositions written below with Clarissa or Septimus. Try to arrange them in the order they are hinted at in the passage.

life/death  
social success / alienation from society  
sanity/madness  
final self-acceptance / rejection of existence  
tolerance of superficial and false life / inability to conform



**14 DISCUSS** how various elements of Woolf's personal experience came together in her novels. Consider her biography and point out the details of the passage relating to her own life.