

Through the Lens of Hannah Arendt and Michael Sandel: On Justice and Politics in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

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Abstract

This paper uses the political philosophies of Hannah Arendt and Michael Sandel to analyze Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Specifically, Arendt mainly offers two concepts: plurality and natality. Plurality means that different people view the world from different perspectives; for something to be real, one should count all perspectives. Natality suggests that every human being can initiate something new in the public sphere through actions. Then, Sandel focuses on the common good and narrative identity. The common good asks how we can live well together. Narrative identity means our lives are stories rooted in family and community. Through the lens of Arendt and Sandel, this paper looks at five parts of *Mrs Dalloway*. First, Clarissa's party creates a small shared world, but it silences the poor, the traumatized, and the odd. Second, Septimus kills himself for protesting against a doctor who uses utilitarian justice. That doctor sacrifices individual dignity for social stability. Third, Clarissa hears of Septimus's death. She feels a deep moral connection to him. This awakens her own capacity to begin again. Fourth, a car backfires on a London street. People gather but do not speak to each other. This shows "faked publicness"—they are spectators, not actors. Fifth, Clarissa is called the perfect hostess, but she is trapped in the private home. Men run politics without her. This reveals how politics is gendered. In the end, the novel teaches that true politics is not about power. It is about building a shared life with dignity. That requires discussing public events, facing pain, respecting differences, and hearing silenced voices.

Keywords

Mrs Dalloway, Hannah Arendt, Michael Sandel, Plurality, Natality, Common Good, Narrative Identity, Justice, Gendered Politics

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is frequently celebrated as a great stream-of-consciousness fiction. However, reading through the dual lens of Hannah Arendt's *The Promise of Politics* and Michael Sandel's *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, one finds that the novel stops looking like just an inner flow of thoughts and becomes an earnest inquiry into the nature of politics. From this perspective, politics is no longer about navigating the bureaucracy or the distribution of interests; rather, it raises an important question of how human beings can together build a dignified, habitable "common world". To be specific, Arendt develops her thoughts on two core concepts: "plurality" (that is, the idea that different people should understand, express, or deal with an event or the world from every possible standpoint; only when an event or the world shows itself from all its different sides can it be real) and "natality" (that is, the humans' ability to start something new); based on these two concepts, Arendt asserts that real politics happens in the words and actions between individuals (Arendt, 2005). Sandel takes "the common good" as his main guide; he criticizes utilitarianism (which believes that people should pursue the maximum social welfare—maximizing utility means maximizing happiness); he criticizes moral individualism (which suggests that one does not have to be responsible for things that he/she/they did not freely choose to do and no one can force a person's idea of a good life on everyone), and he also criticizes voluntarism (which means that humans' free will precedes or determines the moral law, or free choice precedes the goal of the good), because the three of them all neglect individuals' narrative identities—the identities that represent "an individual's sense of belonging" (that is, a feeling of limitation; it is about which country one belongs to, which family, which ethnicity, and so on. It is this sense of belonging that allows one to freely experience the world); in the other words, utilitarianism, moral individualism and voluntarism all neglect that humans are storytelling beings whose lives are rooted in communities and societies and whose lives are like stories about searching for meaning; in addition, based on the common good principle and through individual narrative identity, Sandel turns justice into a way to cultivate civic virtue, thinking that everything that the government does is primarily to help every person achieve their own good life, their own good, the moral law, or fulfill responsibility for voluntary and non-voluntary actions concerning the love and hate of oneself and different others, rather than firstly free choice, or maximum social welfare; because justice is closely tied to how society rewards virtue, defining virtue matters a lot: Sandel believes that living a good life is the virtue that deserves to be rewarded (Sandel, 2009). Using these two thinkers' ways of thinking to examine Clarissa's time, her evening party, Septimus's suicide, the motorcar in the street and the predicament of Clarissa, one can see that the novel is not just about one's private daydreams but about the significance of justice and politics in individuals' ordinary daily life.

This writing uses a dual lens to demonstrate how *Mrs Dalloway* reaches its simple yet influential insight. It does so by investigating: (1) How did the world within

the novel go from being built together by people to gradually falling apart because the built world did not benefit everyone? (2) How did human life go from sharing hardships to being belittled by rigid ideas that reject plurality? (3) How did an individual move from powerlessness to regaining the ability to act? (4) How did public life turn into a politically meaningless spectacle, where people stop communicating with each other and all become mere spectators of power? (5) How does gender shape the political world, and how is it shaped by the political world? The insight of *Mrs Dalloway* is that politics can only build a just world that people share if people look at each other's pain and respect the diversity, natality and civic duty shared by all human beings.

Interpreting *Mrs Dalloway* politically is not a forced connection but has already a clear path in academic study. Alex Zwerdling's book *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* was the first to show the social and political criticism in Woolf's writing in a systematic way; it pointed out that the novel *Mrs Dalloway* constantly focuses on imperial power, class divisions, and the effects of war (Zwerdling, 1986). Jane Marcus takes a feminist approach by, specifically, revealing that Woolf's texts constantly break down patriarchal language and that Clarissa's party is a suppressed form of female public expression (Marcus, 1987). By contrast, Elaine Showalter wrote the book *A Literature of Their Own* in which she places Woolf within the tradition of women's writing, believing that Woolf is confined to her private world due to her gender (Showalter, 1977). Christine Froula, in her book *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*, sets the novel against a background of war and the sudden break that modernity brings; she argues that Septimus's trauma is the mental scar left by imperial, modern and war violences (Froula, 2005). Mark Hussey's book *Virginia Woolf and War* also examines how war destroys the characters' inner world (Hussey, 1991), while Karen DeMeester employs trauma theory to closely read Septimus's character; she points out that Septimus's madness is actually a traumatic experience coming back; this experience returns in the form of symptoms because society refuses to recognize this trauma (DeMeester, 1998). David Bradshaw, in his chapter on Woolf in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, carefully uncovers *Mrs Dalloway*'s hidden social and political meanings, showing how Woolf quietly criticizes medical power, imperial rituals, and the class system (Bradshaw, 2000).

The studies mentioned above all have already clearly shown the novel's obvious political themes, but, to take the discussion deeper—to ask what politics really is, we need to bring in political philosophy. It is the introduction of political philosophy that truly moves the conversation about the literary toward the very nature of the political. In recent years, scholars have paid more attention to the possible connection between Virginia Woolf's novels and Hannah Arendt's political ideas. Arendt, in her book *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958), introduces the concepts of the "space of appearance" and the "common world". These concepts show that the public realm is created when people speak and act together. But this public realm also has clear boundaries, so it is always in danger of falling apart. There are

not many studies that directly use Arendt's ideas to read Woolf's work. However, many critics have studied the tension between public and private life in Woolf's novels. For example, Marcus (1987) looks at how Woolf questions and breaks down the usual public ways of speaking and thinking, especially those controlled by men. Snaith (2000) looks more closely at how Woolf deals with gender-based boundaries between public and private. He treats everyday private interactions as a kind of political act. Additionally, Bowlby (1988) and Lee (1996) explore the meaning of social gatherings in Woolf's writing. They point out that these gatherings suggest the possibility of modern democratic contact, but they also show that such events are exclusive and short-lived. Although these studies do not directly use Arendt's terms, they give us a good background and raise important questions. This background helps us later apply Arendt's ideas to Woolf's texts. Overall, the above existing research shows that Woolf's portrayal of the tension between group gatherings and individual uniqueness matches well with Arendt's view that the public realm is fragile. Furthermore, scholars have turned to other Arendtian concepts beyond the public realm to illuminate Woolf's work. Baena (2020) probes the relationship between thought, work, and authorship, noting that while *The Human Condition* leaves the link between thought and aesthetic or political or worldly objects undertheorized, Arendt later acknowledged in *The Life of the Mind* that thinking—though it withdraws from the “world of appearances”—remains tied to the world through language and metaphor. This tension between withdrawal and worldly engagement resonates with Woolf's narrative practice, where characters' inner thoughts often come out through social moments, not in isolation. Meanwhile, Akaltun (2018) reads *Mrs Dalloway* through Arendt's ideas. She shows that Clarissa's final party rebuilds a sense of “worldliness”. This worldliness comes from recognizing that many different people exist and that each person matters. In short, these studies suggest that Woolf's social scenes—parties, homes, ordinary encounters—do not just show isolation. They stage the fragile balance between withdrawal and engagement. Worldliness, for Arendt and for Woolf, depends on this tension: inner reflection must be expressed outward to create a common world, but that world is always temporary and easily broken when the gathering ends both mentally and physically or its boundaries are tested both mentally and physically. In addition, Michael Sandel's political theory of justice criticizes utilitarianism and stresses the common good and narrative identity; these ideas provide a powerful tool for analyzing moral questions in literature. More specifically, in his book *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, Sandel strongly argues against the idea that it is okay to give up a person's uniqueness and dignity just to achieve the overall welfare or happiness of the group (Sandel, 2009), and in *Democracy's Discontent*, he goes on to explain that when people lose their sense of civic duty, public life becomes empty and hollow (Sandel, 1996). Both of these ideas echo the themes found in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. However, a gap remains in existing scholarship. Scholars have not yet systematically combined the perspectives of Sandel and Arendt to study *Mrs Dalloway*. Such a com-

bined approach would look at two things at the same time. First, it would examine the conditions of the political: what makes a shared political space possible in the first place. Second, it would examine the aims of the political: what goals and values politics should actually pursue. This kind of double-perspective analysis is still missing from current research. This writing works exactly at the meeting point of these two perspectives. Namely, this writing tries to bring together Arendt's political phenomenology and Sandel's ethics of justice, using them as a double lens to analyze how the novel takes politics and boils it down to one basic question: how can human beings build a dignified "common world" together?, whereas the novel undertakes such an analysis through elements like parties and death, time and spectacle, and gender and virtue.

2. The Evening Party: The Micro-Emergence of a Common World

Arendt believes that the heart of politics is the "common world" that preserves plurality, whereas plurality is the fact that human beings are all distinct individuals, each with a different perspective. This common world is created through speech and action. It works like a web that can be viewed from every side. In this web, people not only show themselves to one another but also show that they care about each other (Arendt, 2005). With her party, Clarissa tries to mend what has come apart in a public park (where politics ceases to exist due to the citizens' lack of speech and action before power) by creating a small common world for everyone who comes (Woolf, 2019). In other words, her party allows a set of people once scattered across London to sit together at her table now; and, through toasts, greetings, and memories, words gather these Londoners' separate lives together again. In this way, the uniqueness of each Londoner there can be seen and heard. This social ritual looks small and simple, but it is, in fact, a real practice of being together with different people. Among cups and plates, people step away from their private concerns for a moment. Together, they hold open a little piece of shared space. Even if it only lasts one evening.

Building on this, Sandel gives the evening party a deeper ethical meaning: the party becomes part of the "common good". For him, justice is not just a neutral process of dividing things up; it is, rather, a way of practicing civic virtue for the common good. Through real, concrete, interpersonal interactions, citizens shape their shared purposes for building a sense of a shared narratable identity (Sandel, 2009). Clarissa's party can be seen as such a way of practicing civic virtue (or of practicing how to live a good life), because Clarissa tries to help her guests move beyond their narrow selves and care about the virtues that support one another's mutually beneficial public presence (Woolf, 2019). To put it differently, Clarissa wants her guests to feel the texture of other people's lives in their uniqueness and in their virtues. Thus, around the table, a shared concern begins to grow—a concern for respecting how others truly appear in public. It is a concern that can be told as a common story—a story about one amazing night, where people with

power met or saw people in poverty, yet both sides kept their dignity and remained distinct. However, this practice of virtue is still mostly limited to elite circles, because although the poor and the powerful stay under the same roof, each keeping their dignity or holding on to it in their own way, they still do not talk with each other or interact with each other the way the elite (including the powerful) in the party talk among themselves (Woolf, 2019). In addition, the voices or words of the traumatized veteran Septimus who kills himself for preserving his courage before Clarissa's party, Clarissa's opponent Miss Kilman, and Clarissa's uninvited yet present impoverished cousin, Ellie Henderson, are still silently shut out in the dark. This shows the painful reality regarding the common good. If a community excludes the voices that have been silenced, then the common good is only good for some people, not for every person. In other words, justice must break through the walls of the elite circles; one must ask the hard question of who gets to be part of the story of what human beings call "common". Otherwise, politics, in neglecting to honor the intrinsic worth of every being, forfeits its claim to moral progress altogether. In a politics founded on the common good, the ideas of people in power must not be those that fail to represent the mentally ill, the underclass, the eccentric, and the poor.

3. Madness and Suicide: Protesting against Utilitarian Justice

Arendt keeps asserting that people do not exist in the singular; human plurality comes from both human beings' absolute *differences* and human beings' *equality*; namely, living and acting together seems to be the only way that fits what it means to be human. A person in isolation is powerless. From powerlessness comes fear. Fear makes one either oppress others or be oppressed, either dominate or be dominated; that is to say, powerless beings can no longer help or trust each other. So such fear or powerlessness destroys individuals' ability to act together—that is, individuals' togetherness or their human plurality. Whereas virtue comes from loving the *equality* within human plurality, honor comes from loving the *differences* within human plurality. Only when a person lives with virtue and honor among different people as equals are they not alone or isolated. By the way, equality comes before difference; without equality, differences can not even be measured (Arendt, 2005).

In Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Septimus has a rich inner world: he is in constant dialogue with the ghost of his comrade Evans, who died on the battlefield, and is still mentally acting together with Evans (even Septimus's brave death, throwing himself onto the railings, reminds one of Evans's rash yet courageous death in battle); additionally, Septimus feels that the trees in the public park are like poets who are speaking with him; last but not least, at the end of his life, Septimus used suicide to reject the worldly, utilitarian, moral-individualist, and voluntarist notions of justice (Woolf, 2019). These three notions of justice all reject an Aristotelian teleology, which uses the highest good as the starting point for making

choices—or, more precisely, for judging whether a set of relationships or a bond is fitting (namely, this Aristotelian teleology holds that the good, as an end, comes before the right to free choice) (Sandel, 2009). These three notions of justice also reject the communitarian thinking that values solidarity and loyalty, as well as the narrative theory of the individual that runs parallel to communitarianism. Septimus, however, embodies these rejected ideas of justice: he is a situated being. He believes that one should join the army and serve one's country in times of danger; that one should show loyalty and filial duty to one's family or wife when they need it; and that one should always use one's actions to tell the story of the deep bonds shared with former comrades from the battlefield. Septimus lives in a worldly society where people often indulge in unrestrained freedom, yet he keeps the good as his guiding goal—until he is cornered and forced to take a desperate path just to preserve the courage needed to continue living that goodness. In other words, the utilitarian notion of justice refers to a notion that society seemingly expects everyone to embrace and that categorizes Septimus as an abnormal person who needs to be sent away from his wife and away from human society for the purpose of maximizing normal human beings' happiness. However, by refusing to be separated from his wife and refusing voluntarism (i.e., humans' free will precedes the goal of the good) and utilitarianism, Septimus preserves his kindness to his wife and his spiritual companionship with her forever through the acts of speaking softly and lovingly to her even when he is mentally ill and delirious and through the act of physically taking his own life when the doctor comes to force him away from his wife. Then, to counter the moral-individualist notion of justice, Septimus used his death to take responsibility for the coldness and confusion he had once felt toward his comrade's death on the battlefield. Septimus showed that he had not abandoned his former comrade Evans, even though Septimus had once been indifferent to Evans's death. In other words, Septimus refused the idea that one need not take responsibility for acts one did not freely choose—such as not choosing to kill a comrade or let a comrade die. Instead, he guarded his comrade's death in his own way, by calming his emotions; and, with his own death—both brave and clumsy in its manner—he repaid his spiritual debt to Evans's and the other soldiers' sacrifices. Although suicide may not be the best way to repay such a debt, it is a way that forces others to reflect deeply. Septimus's death, accordingly, sent the following message: human beings are lonely, but Death can embrace them, because death is the final common fate of all human beings; thus, death fulfills human plurality; namely, death permits one to look at a life event from all angles. Nevertheless, again, using suicide to cancel out one's past indifference to the tragedy of human fate is neither scientific nor advisable, but these are still Septimus's unique experiences or moments of human plurality. Septimus is a person who lives with the virtue of kindness and the honor of sacrifice even when death takes him away. Septimus is not powerless or fearful because he never chooses to oppress or dominate others, especially those often in contact with him, such as his own wife and the doctors. Instead, he chooses to see through these people and to

see the society for what it really is. He lives together and acts together with other soldiers, his lovely wife and the poets of nature in the public park. When he was oppressed and dominated by psychiatrists who could connect not with any human being but with the societal norms of stability, he chose to free himself by ending his own life. With his last courage, he held on to his independence, his uniqueness, and his opposition to the way secular people oppress those who are free in spirit.

By contrast, Sir William Bradshaw, a mental health doctor who stands for corrupt medical power and who wants to dominate and oppress Septimus but fails to do so because of Septimus's sudden death and Septimus's wife's unconditional love for Septimus, believes in emotional stability, holding that people must not be mad or subject to emotional highs and lows, and advocates that individuals should conform to social norms (such as, the idea that being healthy is being stable) rather than oppose them (Woolf, 2019). These beliefs prevent individuals who are not emotionally steady from speaking their minds. Even when these individuals are speaking their minds, their speech is treated as nonsense. These beliefs, in addition, also crush Septimus, turning him from a living person into nothing more than a flat case file. All in all, such a doctor disrespects individual differences and misunderstands the meaning of equality. Septimus's uniqueness is ignored under this psychiatric view. Ultimately, equality should not mean that everyone is the same or that everyone should be normal but that people with mental illness are treated as equals, without prejudice, just like those whose minds are steady.

Sandel's criticism of utilitarianism turns into a literary trial on the page. Sir William Bradshaw's thinking is a brutal version of utilitarianism. While aiming to serve the health and stability of the majority, this kind of thinking sacrifices the dignity of those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Bradshaw uses the word "proportion" to advocate that health is living with a sense of proportion (Woolf, 2019). What this proportion implies is a rigid standard of normality. For Bradshaw, health means complete obedience to social norms; from a utilitarian perspective, it becomes that a healthy society only benefits those who follow social norms. It permits no strong feelings, no amazing thoughts, and no absurd behaviors that deviate from the normal. To put it another way, proportion measures how much a person conforms to normal life. Any experience that the majority do not accept (such as extreme sadness, frequent anger, hallucinations and war trauma) the doctor calls a "lack of proportion", meaning "dangerous" (Woolf, 2019). Bradshaw sees Septimus as a threat to the society and pushes this person named Septimus outside the circle of shared humanity (this is one of the reasons why Septimus commits suicide). When medical power can hide behind the word "proportion", the doctor Bradshaw fails to measure complex humanity and breaks the foundation of justice.

Based on the above analysis of Bradshaw's utilitarianism, Septimus's suicide can be viewed as an ethical protest against what Bradshaw represents instead of an aggravation of Septimus's illness. Septimus's death, in a way, proves that his life has unique value (and his life's value is extremely important to his wife because

Septimus and his wife understand each other; additionally, Septimus's life broods on the bluntness and absurdity of a representative soldier's death on the battlefield). Septimus forces the reader to see how an unjust society works to kill people. Such an unjust society only understands "mental balance" (or "proportion"), treating unbalance as evil. But the true evil is actually the embodiment of the mental health doctor Bradshaw, because Bradshaw attempts to utilize suggestion/hints to put pressure on the patient's mind and to strangle the patient's soul (Woolf, 2019). Such acts isolate the patient and thus fill the patient's heart with potential fear, which renders the patient seemingly powerless; such acts express the doctor's thought that the patient should be oppressed by the doctor. At such a moment, suicide becomes an act of power, which enables Septimus to re-embrace the ultimate plurality of humankind.

4. The Narrative Awakening of Responsibility

Arendt regards "natality" as one of the foundations of political action. To begin with, the prehistory of the beginning of politics—namely, life in the Greek city-state—established the language or vocabularies of politics. This language includes the word *arche* (origin), found in "the origin of politics is about the beginner or leader who opens and leads an undertaking"; the related word *archein* (to begin), from "the beginning is created by the beginner or leader"; and the word *prattein* (action), from "only through action can a freely begun undertaking be completed". However, the formal origin of the history of politics lies, strictly speaking, in ancient Rome: the Romans drew on the Greek experience of founding colonies. Then, the Romans added the thought that wandering was not for returning home, but for founding a new home through action, and then providing a foundation for that new home and guarding that new home and the families living in it. What's more: the Christian era came right after the Roman era. It kept Rome's founding strength and became its heir. In Christianity, Jesus believed that people should always act and always forgive. Only the act of forgiveness can free people from the chain of consequences and let them begin again. In sum, there are three complementary ways to examine political action: in early Greece (before city-state), action was seen as making a new beginning; and action never happens when a person is alone but only when a person is together with others (such as with the leader); in Rome, action was seen as establishing a foundation together for something that has already been started; last but not least, Christianity linked action with forgiving past actions or accepting the bad consequences of past actions. All in all, according to Arendt, every human being is a new beginning. Every new beginning is a miracle. This miracle contains one's capacity to initiate things seemingly independently. In the other words, it contains the mysterious ability to allow one to start one's own chain of causes and effects. Such human beings' miracles together suggest the political power to act. One can know that action can interrupt fixed routines and start unexpected new situations. In the end, since beginning (or "natality") is present in politics, politics becomes what makes miracles

possible (Arendt, 2005).

In the novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa repeatedly thinks back to the summer at Bourton where she spent time with her lover Peter Walsh while she was young. And, meanwhile, her daily life is all about arranging flowers, receiving visitors, and following social customs (Woolf, 2019). On the one hand, she is nostalgic, repeatedly longing for Peter, who is as empathetic as she is. On the other hand, she has grown used to being the proper *Mrs Dalloway*, the wife of Mr. Richard Dalloway, and the heroine of the parties that she herself gives. Because she keeps getting lost in past memories, and this makes her feel that her days are repetitive, that she is unable to take action now, and that she must remain the perfect hostess she is used to being, she finds it hard to break out of this repeating cycle of time. Septimus's death, and her recognition of it—of him as a being who had once lived—hit her like an explosion (Woolf, 2019). Septimus's death shatters Clarissa's beautiful, closed-off daily life. Such a death takes the sharp form of a new “event” or of a foundation for a new “event” that forgives Septimus's past acts of indifference toward his friend Evans. Such a death affects Clarissa, causing her once-sealed sensibility to be suddenly torn open and causing her to be able to act. That is, Clarissa's own miracle of empathy (that can recognize another being's peace and pain) now suddenly encounters another reflective miracle of empathy, which belongs to Septimus (whose actions show his deep understanding of his comrade Evans) and which now can also be termed the subtle awakening of natality, or of the capacity for new beginnings. In a word, Clarissa discovers her own plurality and begins to act together with Septimus's living spirit ever since she discovered his plurality, and she is, therefore, inspired by the natality that she has witnessed in such an encounter for political actions (actions such as silently critiquing and revealing the evil and ugly face of the psychiatrist).

Sandel investigates this scene through the lens of narrative identity and he also brings a dimension of justice into the scene. He argues that, to live a just life, a person should first make peace with his/her/their own life story; at the same time, the person must also develop an ethical co-feeling with the life stories of others (Sandel, 2009). In other words, living justly means reconciling with one's own story and feeling ethically connected to the stories of others. During her evening party, the novel's female protagonist, Clarissa, hears about a stranger's—that is, Septimus's—death. She feels an involuntary quivering movement inside. At that moment, she thinks that the stranger's death is somehow a part of herself (Woolf, 2019). This thought is a sudden awakening of narrative compassion that the common good demands. Clarissa begins to tell her own story anew, with a spirit awakened by the stranger's spirit and she does this by embodying the stranger's dignified, physical death into her own fate—her own fate as a human being, as a lover of two men, as a mother of a daughter, as a hostess of the evening party, as a female “politician” who turns her home into a real “park” (that is, a real public place) during the party, as a fighter for PTSD justice, and as a woman who is about to become as old as the old lady across the window, an old lady that Clarissa feels a

deep resonance with. That is to say, Clarissa starts to feel a moral connection with a suffering person that she has never met; she also begins to conclude that being responsible for a stranger's pain is the hidden foundation of justice. As a result, justice is not merely an abstract rule; it is an ethical moment. In this moment, someone else's suffering truly moves the singular being (here, Clarissa). Then, this being, Clarissa, becomes plural because she embodies diversity through being profoundly touched by another human being. In the end, based on the concept of natality, this plural being readjusts the path of her own life story and shares the same mental sky with the other suffering beings, as with Septimus and the old lady.

5. The Motorcar in the Street: Faked Publicness

Arendt believed that people share a common world. This common world requires people to nurture it and collaborate to sustain it. When people stop caring and stop taking part in this shared world, bad things will happen. The community will then fall apart and become a spectacle of "world alienation". "World alienation" means that people feel disconnected from their political world—just like strangers within their society (Arendt, 2005).

At its very beginning, the novel *Mrs Dalloway* describes a scene on a London street—namely, a car suddenly backfires with a loud bang while Clarissa is buying flowers (Woolf, 2019). This scene acts as a striking image that reveals a deeper problem—the problem of people's relationship with authority. Everyone knows that the car's fancy appearance represents the wealthy, while the car's high-end curtains suggest that the car belongs to an authoritative figure. The noise of the backfire of the car instantly makes all the passersby, including Clarissa and the woman selling flowers, stop and stare at the car, which has its curtains drawn shut to keep its owner's secrets and identity (Woolf, 2019). However, as I just mentioned, from its outward appearance, one can tell that the car is a powerful or influential person's car, and such a car's tire burst is a public incident that takes place in a public setting. Such an incident should have stirred up some ripples of public debate, yet such an incident did not, because the person in the car is of such high status that no one dares say anything about him, nor about his car. In other words, the attention of the onlookers, or passersby, is captured immediately by such a car's backfire, or by such a machine's sudden halt. At least, a machine does not care whether the car's owner is an ordinary person or a person of power and privilege—it just breaks down in an instant. The onlookers or passersby, however, do not speak to each other after witnessing such an incident. They do not discuss any shared public issue—and in particular, they do not talk together about this incident of the influential person's car backfiring. They merely let out exclamations, and then, they simply stare lifelessly in silence at this broken symbol of authority: like ordinary persons, the powerful are also subject to life's uncertainties, such as a car breakdown. And, when the car breakdown happens, even the delight of the flower transaction between the flower seller and Clarissa vanishes in an instant. Life appears utterly fragile before the emergence and sudden eruption of

authority; everything comes to a standstill in a world of alienation. The backfire, like a mirror, reveals the persons' coldness toward one another and their unenthusiastic attitude toward authority when confronted with power. In short, people are together on the street but do not communicate with one another. This is a perfect example of faked publicness. People seem to gather, but in reality they are like separate or isolated atoms. They are passively controlled by the car accident, instead.

Seeing from Sandel's perspective, one can say that this spectacle shows that citizens no longer feel they control their own lives or that citizens have lost their sense of autonomy. Sandel believes that justice means that people in a community should act as participants; they must discuss and make judgments about the common good (Sandel, 2009). However, the onlookers around the motorcar in the street are merely spectators rather than actors (Woolf, 2019). These onlookers cannot turn their focus into careful thinking about what is right or good. When they see a public problem, they fail to ask the question of how we ought to live. The imperial center bustles with carriages and horses, but beneath the splendor, the just community quietly falls apart; people behold one another, but they cannot render one another partners in discourse and in action. Politics is, thus, emptied of meaning and shrinks to hollow rituals of power.

6. The Predicament of the Perfect Hostess: Gendered Politics

Arendt thinks that action and appearance in public life are significant. Nonetheless, her way of thinking also helps reveal a historical injustice: for a long time, women—especially, women of humble birth—are strictly kept inside the private world of the home (Arendt, 2005). In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa has a gift for understanding the hidden aspects of other individuals. She also never stops caring about tiny details, such as the exact color of a lamp, where a cushion is placed, or when a person undergoes a shift in his/her/their inner landscape or delicate emotions. Furthermore, she holds an almost religious belief that a party can draw separate souls together into one bright, shared moment (Woolf, 2019). All of these talents mark Clarissa as a genius at creating a beautiful public appearance (that is supported by a rich inner life), but her appearance remains shut inside the drawing room, where such an appearance can never turn into a real public action that brings lasting change to the political world that all individuals share. The novel gives Clarissa the title of the “perfect hostess”, but it then immediately shows the cruelty hidden inside that praise: Clarissa's intelligence for arranging things is spent on choosing flowers and mending a green dress rather than on managing political affairs and distributing justice. Meanwhile, men run the empire over lunch at Lady Bruton's; Clarissa is not even invited. That is, the lunch discussion excludes the perfect hostess—a woman of modest origins—but includes Lady Bruton, the descendant of a great general from the upper class, along with Clarissa's husband, Richard, who works in government, and other males. When the news of

Septimus's suicide reaches her party, however, Clarissa goes into a small room by herself where she feels the terror, or the fear, and the dignity of Septimus's leap. So, she begins to understand Septimus more deeply than any doctor or politician in the novel, but she never speaks this out loud to any of her guests (including her intimate friend Peter); thus, the private insight never becomes a public stand; she never openly opposes the powers that once destroyed Septimus. In sum, Clarissa's publicness is trapped inside the house. This is a visible sign of a political structure—a structure that shuts humble women out of real participation in politics. Clarissa and the novel echo Arendt's critique of a historical injustice by showing how the private sphere confines women to domestic drudgery and solitude, yet Clarissa and the novel challenge the ordinary public-private divide: although Clarissa's parties take place in the private sphere, these parties are still acts of world-building, and intimate ties, such like Clarissa's ties with Peter, Sally or Septimus, still generate the plurality and shared meaning that Arendt reserves for public life. It is evident, then, that women, such as Clarissa, are imperceptibly turning some of their private spheres into public ones, even though social forces are pushing them back to the private sphere.

Sandel reminds the reader that the common good is bigger than politics. The common good is not just about what happens in parliament or on a public stage. The common good must also make room for kindness and understanding in individuals' private daily lives (Sandel, 2009). When Clarissa hears about Septimus's death, she feels a deep shock. Nevertheless, this shock that comes from her own conscience is moral. It is like a sudden awakening inside her—an awakening that has nothing to do with social status or social position, that has nothing to do with political influence, and, that also has nothing to do with the public roles that society gives to men and women (Woolf, 2019). When she stands alone in the privacy of a little room, she not only feels pity for Septimus but also recognizes that Septimus's defiance was an act of human dignity and of human freedom; Septimus refuses to submit to the doctors who would have crushed his soul. Clarissa's recognition of this is a form of justice—a justice that no courtroom could ever deliver. Her silent communion with the dead stranger proves that, according to Sandel, the common good transcends mere politics, for moral understandings do not come from public stages but from hidden corners of individuals' private lives. Additionally, in the novel, the doctors see Septimus as a case to deal with while the politicians see Septimus as a problem that must be silenced, but Clarissa alone gives Septimus something that the public world refused to give him—that is, pure, unselfish understanding (Woolf, 2019). Clarissa's kindness—quiet, invisible, politically powerless—is the kind of space that the common good requires in one's daily life. This space exists outside the system of empire and is also beyond the control of any public institution. In those ways, Woolf suggests that moral understanding can grow where political power is entirely absent. Clarissa can never change a law or influence a policy but she can reach empathy that specifies the common good. Yet one is still aware that Clarissa cannot truly take part in public

life; her goodness can only burn inside her heart. She cannot turn the goodness into real, political actions that will be able to change other people's lives as much as emotions and understanding change her life. Still, Clarissa's predicament reveals the double cost of a political system that excludes women. First, it takes away a woman's right to fully practice her virtue. Second, it harms the soul of the whole community by pushing the moral voices of half its members back into the private, inner world. Nonetheless, morality does not become powerless. Instead, it survives the predicament through kindness and understanding.

7. Conclusion

When the reader reads Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* using Arendt's and Sandel's perspectives, Clarissa's evening party and Septimus's downfall are not just two separate stories anymore; rather, Clarissa's party and Septimus's tragedy help the reader see a crucial reflection on what politics means. In particular, Arendt reminds the reader that what makes politics alive is human beings' diversity and the beings' capacity to act in ways that break through standstill. Sandel shows the reader that justice is a way of living together under a government that helps everyone become better persons, and protects and respects every person's humanity; such living is held together by the common good, and it values each person's own narrative of where they belong in life—instead of simply maximizing interests, the so-termed happiness, or unchecked freedom. During her party, Clarissa tries to weave the world into a whole through words and through greeting or seeing each guest; her effort, though fragile because it silences voices (such as that of her uninvited yet present cousin, Ellie Henderson, and that of Miss Kilman, also uninvited, the history tutor of Clarissa's daughter, who opposed Clarissa and did not come) that do not fit, still points, however clumsily, to a way a community might put itself back together. This opposes the car accident that provokes no public debate in the street. By contrast, Septimus uses his death as a quiet and decisive way to protest against societal unfairness; such death breaks down Septimus's mental-health doctor's cold and self-serving version of so-called social justice and brings people—especially Clarissa and her youthful lover Peter Walsh who believes and senses all human beings are connected as one—to a world where empathy is possible. In the end, Clarissa's and Septimus's fates overlap on a summer day in London; together they reveal a simple truth: politics is not about the calculus or pursuit of power; it is, instead, about something that all human beings cannot avoid, which is figuring out what kind of shared life can let people live with dignity. Hidden inside the novel *Mrs Dalloway* is an ethical parable that offers an answer to what a dignified common life is. The answer is that people live a shared life with dignity only in a place where public events are discussed, suffering is faced, every different life or plural humanity is respected, and voices once silenced or excluded are spoken and heard again. In the end, politics becomes possible because of natality, plurality and civic duty, and Woolf also shows the reader the purpose of politics: that is, ideally, politics should work to improve morality.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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