Clarissa and Septimus

Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway (1925)

Part I

Page 478 - **comprehension**

2) **READ** the passage. It can be divided into five sections. Write a caption to describe the content of each section.

**SECTION 1**: Mrs Dalloway enters the flower shop and tries to overcome her hatred for Mrs Killman by enjoying the colours and the scents of the different kinds of flowers in the shop

Nonsense, nonsense! she cried to herself, pushing through the swing doors of Mulberry's the florists.

She advanced, light, tall, very upright, to be greeted at once by button-faced Miss Pym, whose hands were always bright red, as if they had been stood in cold water with the flowers.

There were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac; and carnations, masses of carnations. There were roses; there were irises. Ah yes--so she breathed in the earthy garden sweet smell as she stood talking to Miss Pym who owed her help, and thought her kind, for kind she had been years ago; very kind, but she looked older, this year, turning her head from side to side among the irises and roses and nodding tufts of lilac with her eyes half closed, snuffing in, after the street uproar, the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness. And then, opening her eyes, how fresh like frilled linen clean from a laundry laid in wicker trays the roses looked; and dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale--as if it were the evening and girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer's day, with its almost blue-black sky, its delphiniums, its carnations, its arum lilies was over; and it was the moment between six and seven when every flower--roses, carnations, irises, lilac--glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds; and how she loved the grey-white moths spinning in and out, over the cherry pie, over the evening primroses!

And as she began to go with Miss Pym from jar to jar, choosing, nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when--oh! a pistol shot in the street outside!

**SECTION 2**: A pistol shot connects the narration of what was going on in the shop with the external world

"Dear, those motor cars," said Miss Pym, going to the window to look, and coming back and smiling apologetically with her hands full of sweet peas, as if those motor cars, those tyres of motor cars, were all her fault.

The violent explosion which made Mrs. Dalloway jump and Miss Pym go to the window and apologise came from a motor car which had drawn to the side of the pavement precisely opposite Mulberry's shop window. Passers-by who, of course, stopped and stared, had just time to see a face of the very greatest importance against the dove-grey upholstery, before a male hand drew the blind and there was nothing to be seen except a square of dove grey.

Yet rumours were at once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson's scent shop on the other, passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud, swift, veil-like upon hills, falling indeed with something of a cloud's sudden sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly. But now mystery had brushed them with her wing; they had heard the voice of authority; the spirit of religion was abroad with her eyes bandaged tight and her lips gaping wide. But nobody knew whose face had been seen. Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's? Whose face was it? Nobody knew.

Edgar J. Watkiss, with his roll of lead piping round his arm, said audibly, humorously of course: "The Proime Minister's kyar.

**SECTION 3**: Septimus Warren Smith is introduced. The scene is presented from his point of view.

Septimus Warren Smith, who found himself unable to pass, heard him.

Septimus Warren Smith, aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazel eyes which had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?

Everything had come to a standstill. The throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body. The sun became extraordinarily hot because the motor car had stopped outside Mulberry's shop window; old ladies on the tops of omnibuses spread their black parasols; here a green, here a red parasol opened with a little pop. Mrs. Dalloway, coming to the window with her arms full of sweet peas, looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry. Every one looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?

**SECTION 4**: Lucrezia (Septimus’ wife) is introduced through her direct speech

"Let us go on, Septimus," said his wife, a little woman, with large eyes in a sallow pointed face; an Italian girl.

But Lucrezia herself could not help looking at the motor car and the tree pattern on the blinds. Was it the Queen in there--the Queen going shopping?

The chauffeur, who had been opening something, turning something, shutting something, got on to the box.

"Come on," said Lucrezia.

But her husband, for they had been married four, five years now, jumped, started, and said, "All right!" angrily, as if she had interrupted him.

**SECTION 5**: Lucrezia’s fears about her husband’s mental instability come to surface

People must notice; people must see. People, she thought, looking at the crowd staring at the motor car; the English people, with their children and their horses and their clothes, which she admired in a way; but they were "people" now, because Septimus had said, "I will kill myself"; an awful thing to say. Suppose they had heard him? She looked at the crowd. Help, help! she wanted to cry out to butchers' boys and women. Help! Only last autumn she and Septimus had stood on the Embankment wrapped in the same cloak and, Septimus reading a paper instead of talking, she had snatched it from him and laughed in the old man's face who saw them! But failure one conceals. She must take him away into some park.

"Now we will cross," she said.

She had a right to his arm, though it was without feeling. He would give her, who was so simple, so impulsive, only twenty-four, without friends in England, who had left Italy for his sake, a piece of bone.

3- **AS YOU READ**, make notes about the setting in time and place.

Section 1: - Clarissa enters the shop (place)

- “years ago”: Miss Pym reminds how kind Clarissa used to be (shift in the past)

- “this year” -> “she looked older” (shift in the present)

Section 2: - Mrs Pym goes to the window to understand what has just happened outside

- “those motorcars, those tyres of motorcars” -> the narrator refers to something that isn’t close to Mrs Pym

-“the side of the pavement”, “precisely opposite Mulberry’s shop window” ->spatial collocation of the motorcar from which the noise came from

-“from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson’s scent shop on the other” -> description of the place where the shop is located, where the rumours about the pistol shot spread all at once

Section 3: - “the car had stopped outside Mulberry’s shop window” -> Septimus (shift in place)

- Mrs Dalloway -> “coming to the window”

Section 4: - “on the box” -> the chauffeur is going to drive Septimus and Lucrezia away

- “four, five years” -> length of Septimus and Lucrezia’s marriage

Section 5: - “last autumn” -> shift in the past of Lucrezia and Septimus

- “on the Embarkment” -> shift in place (in a past time)

4- **FOCUS** on the flower shop in lines 1-20. Underline the phrases referring to the florist and then fill in the table below about the flowers.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Flowers** | **Their colours** |
| Delphiniums  Sweet peas  Lilac  Carnations  Roses  Irises | Blue-black  Violet  Red  Snow white  Pale  Deep orange |

5- **WRITE DOWN** the main event in the passage. Then, in your own words, summarise the various people’s reactions to it.

* The main event in the passage consists of the violent explosion that came from the car in front of the flower shop’s window. Mrs Pym, the florist, goes immediately to the window to see what has just happened and apologizes with Mrs Clarissa Dalloway, as if it was her fault. On the other side, Septimus Warren Smith is terrified (“as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames”). Moreover, people around the shop begin to chat and to make conjectures about who might have caused the explosion.

6- **CONSIDER** how the car is described and list the inferences people make about who may be in the car.

The description of the spatial collocation on the “motor car” is exploited by the writer to make the reader aware of the collocation of the shop in London (indeed it is situated in one of the richest neighbourhoods of the city).

7- **COLLECT** the details concerning the description of Septimus Warren Smith and his wife in lines 45-86. Fill in the table below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Septimus Warren Smith** | **His wife** |
| Age | About 30 | 24 |
| Nationality | English | Italian |
| Appearance | Pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, hazel eyes | Little, large eyes, sallow pointed face |
| Attitude | Paranoid | Worried about her husband’s attitude |

8- **UNDERLINE** the words and phrases which give insight into a changing society.

“Dear, those motor cars”

**ANALYSIS**

9- **TICK** as appropriate to say how the narrative is organized.

* Following chronological order
* Respecting a logical pattern
* Piece by piece, through association

10- **SAY** what kind of narrator and point of view Woolf uses. What is the author’s aim in using this method?

* Virginia Woolf uses a third-person narrator. The point of view shifts from a character to another: at the beginning of the extract Mrs Dalloway’s thought are presented; then there’s the description of the shop and of Clarissa from Mrs Pym’s point of view; in the second part of the extract the focus of the narration is on the figures of Septimus and Lucrezia. The writer’s aim in using this method is to give a multiple and complete perspective of the event, describing it from a multiplicity of points of view.

11- **LOOK** at the diagram below. How much action can you find in the passage? What does the extract mostly consist of?

* Action is reduced to the minimum; the focus is on what happens in the characters’ minds.

12- **POINT OUT** the main aspects of Clarissa’s personality.

* Clarissa is described by Mrs Pym as “very kind” woman; before arriving at the shop the thinks about her hatred for Mrs Killman, her daughter’s teacher, but as she enjoys “this beauty, this scent, this colours” she is pervaded by a sense of gentleness.

13- **FOCUS** on lines 45-75 and list the sentences that convey the idea that Septimus is in the grip of a very serious mental illness. Match them with the corresponding states of mind:

* Alienation “was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?
* Panic “as if some horror had come almost to surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him”
* Feelings of guilt “which had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too”
* Terror and anger “jumped, started, and said, “All right!” angrily, as if she had interrupted him”
* Madness “Septimus had said, “I will kill myself””

14- **THE CHARACTERS’ RESPONSE** to the world around them is both emotional and physical. Go through lines 1-68 and find words and phrases referring to sensory experience. Which sense is predominant?

* “There were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac; and carnations, masses of carnations. There were roses; there were irises” - sight
* “so she breathed in the earthly garden sweet smell” - smell
* “snuffing in” - smell
* “the street uproar” - hearing
* “the delicious scent, the exquisite coolness” - smell
* “how fresh […] the roses looked; and dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale” - sight
* “a pistol shot in the street outside!” - hearing
* “a motor car which had drawn to the side of the pavement precisely opposite Mulberry’s shop window” - sight
* “dove-grey upholstery” - sight
* “the sun became extraordinarily hot” - touch
* “here a green, here a red parasol” - sight
* “opened with a little pop” - hearing
* The predominant sense is sight.