Analysis of “Clarissa and Septimus” by Virginia Woolf

COMPREHENSION

2. The passage can be organized into five sections:

* + The first section goes from line 1 to line 25: **Mrs Dalloway at the florists.** In the first section Mrs Dalloway is presented by the omniscient narrator while she is smelling and looking at some flowers. The first section ends with “a pistol shot in the street outside”.
  + The second section goes from line 26 to line 44: **The sudden arrival of the Proime Minister’s kyar.** In the second section the omniscient narrator illustrates people staring at a mysterious motor. Indeed, everyone is interested in knowing the passenger’s identity.
  + The third section goes from line 45 to line 62: **Septimus Warren Smith.** In the third section the narrator presents Septimus’ enigmatic appearance. In addition, the narrator illustrates people’s reaction in front of the mysterious passenger’s arrival.
  + The fourth section goes from line 63 to line 71: **Septimus Warren Smith’s wife.** In the fourth section the narrator presents Septimus’s wife. In particular, he unveils her secret feelings towards him and her hidden discomfort.
  + The fifth section goes from line 72 to line 86: **The existential discomfort**. In the last section the narrator focuses on the wife’s discomfort due to her choices of life.

3. In the first section the story is set at Mulberry’s the florists, while right from the second section the setting shifts to the street next to the florists.

4.

| Flowers | Their colours |
| --- | --- |
| Delphiniums | Blue |
| Sweet peas | Violet and White |
| Lilacs | Violet |
| Carnations | Red |
| Roses | Red |
| Irisis | Violet |

5. The main event in the passage is the sudden arrival of the dove-grey motor. Indeed, the luxurious car catches the attention of all the people around it. Therefore there are many different reactions in front of the event. For instance, Miss Pym feels apologetic for such noisy roaring towards Mrs Dalloway as if she were the responsible for it. Besides, every pedestrian stares at the car, since everyone is curious to find out the real identity of the aristocratic passenger. It follows that every human activity seems to stop because of the arrival of such mysterious figure. Even Septimus Warren is suspended in such moment, while her wife insists asking him to cross the street.

6. The car is illustrated as a luxurious one. Indeed the “dove-grey upholstery” reminds of the typical refined color of aristocracy,

People’s inferences about the mysterious identity of the passenger:

* + the Prince of Wales
  + the Queen
  + the Prime Minister

7.

|  | Septimus Warren Smith | His wife |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Age | 30 | 24 |
| Nationality | English | Italian |
| Appearance | pale-faced  beak-nosed  wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat  hazel eyes | little woman  large eyes  sallow pointed face |
| Attitude | apprehensive | simple  impulsive |

8. The repetition of words like “motor car” gives insight into a changing society. The technology innovation is presented as a recent event since the arrival of the aristocratic car becomes the centre of attraction for all the pedestrians. Therefore, the use of cars and other innovative objects may be still limited to people.

10. Woolf uses a third person narrator, who is an omniscient one. In this way, she can focus on the characters’ conflict between inner and external reality.

11. In the passage the narrator investigates both the characters’ actions and intimate thoughts. However, the story is more focused on the characters’ inner world rather than their external one.

12. Right from this extract Clarissa Dalloway is presented as an aristocratic lady with a worthy attitude. Indeed, even if her internal reality is upset by her hatred towards Elizabeth’s history teacher, she tries to smother such irrational feeling. In addition, she is also presented as a curious lady since she is also fascinated by the mysterious identity.

13.

Panic: 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.

Feelings of guilt: It is I who am blocking the way, he thought.

Madness: I will kill myself.

Alienation: he had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too.

Terror and anger: He jumped, started and said “all right” angrily, as if she had interrupted him.

14.

Sight: light, tall, dark, red, white, violet, deep orange, flowers, beauty, colour

Smell: delicious scent, exquisite coolness, sweet peas

Hear: roaring of the motor car

The predominant sense is the sight.

**Analysis:**

The extract belongs to Virginia Woolf’s novel “Mrs Dalloway” (1925). The passage deals with the presentation of two characters, who are Clarissa and Septimus, during a particular occasion.

Right from the analysis of the passage the reader can organize it into five sections according to the main events presented.

In particular the first section goes from from line 1 to line 25 and its focus is the presentation of Mrs Dalloway at the florists. Indeed, the lady is described by the narrator, who is an omniscient one, while she is smelling and looking at some flowers. Just considering the first section the reader is able to understand one of the most frequent features of Virginia Woolf’s poetry: the use of synecdoche. Indeed, the juxtaposition of sensations related to different sensory levels is useful to convey the idea of realism. For instance , the accumulation of expressions belonging to different sensory levels like as “this beauty, this scent, this colour” (line 22) conveys the idea of realistic sensations about such experience. Indeed, the reader perceives such “beauty, scent, and colour” as if he/she were there.

The last part of the first section makes the reader understand one important aspect of Mrs. Dalloway’ s identity: even if she is troubled by “that hatred, that monster” (line 24) she is able to hide her intimate reality thanks to the external world. Indeed, the encounter with Miss Pym gives her the opportunity to find a balance between her afflicted inner world and the external one. It follows that, Mrs Dalloway is presented as a character who is searching for a balance.

The first section ends with a sudden event: “a pistol shot in the street outside”.

The second section goes from line 26 to line 44 and its focus is the arrival of a mysterious car. Indeed, in the second section the narrator illustrates people staring at a mysterious motor car. They are all fascinated by its arrival because it is a news. In particular, its “dove-grey” colour, typically associated to aristocratic elegance, makes people reflect upon the enigmatic figure inside the car. Therefore all the pedestrians starts to make inferences about such person: “Was it the Prince of Wales’s? the Queen’s, the Prime Minister’s? Whose face was it? Nobody knew” (lines 41 and 42).

The third section goes from line 45 to line 62 and it is characterized by the presentation of Septimus Warren Smith**.** Septimus is a pedestrian involved in the scene who is staring at the motor car. The arrival of the car prevents him to cross the street, so he is reflecting upon what happens. Septimus is presented by the narrator both physically and emotionally. As regards his physical appearance, he is characterized by a “pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat with hazel eyes” (lines 46 and 47). However, his inner side seems to be more complex since all his actions are influenced by feelings of panic “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” (lines 57, 58 and 59), guilt “It is I who am blocking the way, he thought” (line 60), terror and anger “He jumped, started and said “all right” angrily, as if she had interrupted him” (lines 70 and 71) and madness “I will kill myself” (line 75).

The fourth section goes from line 63 to line 71 and its focus is the presentation of Septimus Warren Smith’s wife. Likewise Septimus’s description, his wife is portrayed both physically and emotionally. Indeed, she is presented as “ a little woman, with large eyes in a sallow pointed face”, who is in trouble with her husband. In particular she feels embarrassed by her husband’s behaviour. Such feelitng of discomfort is also conveyed in the last section, that goes from line 72 to line 86. In the fifth section the narrator tells a particular episode about the private life between Septimus and his wife. In particular, his wife turns out to be unsatisfied of her choices of life. The discomfort perceived in the last section can be expanded in the whole extract since all the characters seem to be afflicted by such terrible existential condition.

Despite this, even if Mrs Dalloway tries to find a possible balance in the conflict between her inner and external world, Septimus does not put efforts in acting like her. It follows that, Septimus’s absence of balance conditions his wife’s life.