South Pasadena High School

Senior English [Nicholson/MacDonald] 1994

Frankenstein: Background

Virginia Woolf

Introduction to Mrs. Dalloway

# Concept of the Doppelganger

A doppelganger (or doubleganger) is, as defined by Webster’s New World Dictionary, “The ghost or wraith of a living person,” but in literature, where the doppelganger has been a popular device since the early nineteenth century (cf. particularly the work of early nineteenth‑century German writers like E.T.A. Hoffmann and Heinrich von Kleist), it has come gradually to take on a more profound meaning‑to represent not simply the double or twin, the mirror image, of a character’s personality, but often a kind of reversal of it, a negative image, a self which expresses all the dark and normally inexpressible (in Freudian terms “repressed”) desires of the ordinary daytime self. A creation like Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll‑Mr. Hyde is a good, and well‑known, example of this: Dr. Jekyll, the enlightened scientist, is the conscious, socially acceptable self‑as it were, the ego. Mr. Hyde, the brutish killer, is the dark underself, the inadmissible double ‑ the id. Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer” is another obvious example: Leggatt, the midnight visitor, not only represents the captain’s own repressed impulses, but also what the captain himself might have become, under other circumstances‑a kind of expression of the captain in another dimension or time‑warp. A number of other nineteenth‑century works employ the doubling mechanism (for the nineteenth century, with its pioneering studies of the mind‑of schizophrenia, of the unconscious‑was vitally interested in this concept). Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, for example, may be said to use it in a rather subtle way, for the Hyde‑like monster Frankenstein creates is in a sense the double of Frankenstein, the expression of a submerged and crippled part of his mind. Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, too, is a variation on the doubling theme: Dorian, of course, has no really good self, but the secret of his picture is the secret of a kind of physical double, one who seems to take on himself ‑ as Hyde does ‑ the burden of evil, while the other, Dorian himself, seems to remain unscathed.

# The Sane and the Insane:

But if Hyde, **Frankenstein’s** monster, and Dorian Gray’s picture all must bear the burden of evil, Septimus Warren Smith, Mrs. Dalloway’s double in Virginia Woolf’s novel, must bear instead, as Virginia Woolf declared, the burden of insanity and, as we shall see, of a preternaturally heightened consciousness, a consciousness especially of the world’s wrongs, which Clarissa Dalloway herself does not seem to have. Perhaps this vision of the world “as seen by the sane and the insane side by side” was an outgrowth of Mrs. Woolf’s own recurrent bouts of mental illness. She was apparently prey to fits of anxiety, depression, and other symptoms on and off throughout her life, but especially just after she had finished a novel. In the end, indeed, she committed suicide to avoid succumbing to another attack and becoming a burden to her husband as well as herself. But whatever his genesis, Septimus, Clarissa’s dark double, solved a technical as well as a psychological problem for Mrs. Woolf. She had originally planned to have Clarissa commit suicide at the end of the book, an act which would demonstrate the hollowness of her society‑matron life, her life as a “perfect hostess.” Instead, however, she chose a subtler and more metaphysical way of illuminating Clarissa’s life; she interwove Clarissa’s seemingly “normal” thoughts and feelings with the supposedly “abnormal” consciousness of Septimus and in the end, through Septimus’ suicide and Clarissa’s intense reaction to it, she made her final point about Clarissa. Whether this technique was entirely successful has been debated by a number of critics, and though most concede the brilliance of Mrs. Woolf’s style and the wit (in the sense of intelligence rather than humor) of her plan, a majority remain, finally, unmoved by Mrs. Dalloway. The connection between Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith is perhaps, at last, too tenuous, too metaphysical; like terms of a Cowley metaphor, they are yoked by violence, not necessity, and a reader’s response to their juxtaposition is cerebral rather than emotional.