

Mrs. dalloway: the self-characterization and introspection of virginia woolf



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It is neither unique nor uncommon for great authors to weave themselves into the fabric of their own works; it is a technique that adds realism and believability to otherwise complex fictional characters. D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are examples of this occurrence in which the main character is a literarily-conscious version of the author himself. Oftentimes authors will imbue their characters with aspects of their own personalities because such familiar characteristics offer depth and insight to a figure's development. However, it is distinctly less common for an author to create a complete portrait of herself spread among several characters, rather than taking on the role of a single central figure. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf accomplishes such a feat by separating her own personality among the two characters Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. These counterparts serve to illustrate the devastating polar extremes caused by Woolf's manic depression, yet still remain faithful to the less than 24-hour timeframe of the story. The character of Mrs. Dalloway was not new at the time that she wrote the novel. Both Clarissa and her husband Richard had been introduced in *The Voyage Out*, published after Woolf's third mental breakdown, and about the same time as the declaration of World War I (Cameron, *About Mrs. Dalloway* par. 2 & Bloom par. 9). Rather than the sympathetic, deeper and developed characters portrayed in her later novel, the Dalloways were characterized as a pretentious and overbearing husband and his submissive, superficial wife, originally modeled by Woolf's socialite friend Kitty Maxse. However, after the war ended, Woolf published a series of short stories which explored Clarissa's character, like *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street*, molding her into a more introspective woman with hints of hidden depressed tendencies

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(Cameron, About Mrs. Dalloway par. 2-3). Thus, it appears that Woolf's own mental instability and the end of the war played key roles in the development of Mrs. Dalloway's character and Woolf's decision to take her on as part of her own persona. From the very first page, we are thrown into the action of the day - Clarissa stating she will buy flowers and fretting over her party. Both actions are seemingly superficial, but with the first sound of the morning, the unhooking of a door, she is drawn almost reclusively into memory of happy times in her youth (Woolf 3). This behavior is repeated throughout the novel; over the course of 24 hours, she can focus on little but her party, despite being frequently and severely interrupted by her own mind's recollections and her reflections on them. While it may seem that this behavior is merely "normal focus" over the day long period, Clarissa's intense concentration is a behavior known as hypomania, one of the manic extremes of bipolar disorder, and one that Clarissa and Woolf share (Purse, par. 5-6). Woolf herself was known to work on literature for unremitting day-long periods (Ingram par. 16). These hypomanic episodes are often accompanied by feelings of extra creativity and innovation, confidence, and the ability to shirk off major and minor problems that would otherwise be crippling during depressive periods (Purse, par. 5-6). While Woolf used her hypomanic periods to write, Clarissa uses hers to plan for the evening's events. We see her carefully and deliberately arrange the world around her for the festivities. After a moment of feeling rejected over her lack of an invitation to Lady Bruton's luncheon, she isolates herself and then decides to mend her dress, an indirect instance of creativity employed to cope with a feeling that might otherwise lead to a devastating episode (Woolf 29-30).

Nevertheless, depressive tendencies are never completely absent during <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloway-the-self-characterization-and-introspection-of-virginia-woolf/>

these periods, and sufferers may still experience feelings of helplessness, regret, and uninhibited behavior, all of which Clarissa displays (Purse, par. 5-6). We learn that she no longer takes pleasure in the things she once enjoyed. She is also profoundly lacking in the confidence of her own education, yet she is much more capable than she believes: "How she had got through life on the few twigs of knowledge Frãulein Daniels gave them she could not think. She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed (Woolf 8)." Similarly, Woolf was an extremely bright child who benefited from her distinguished father's library, but she herself was denied the education provided to her brothers (Cameron, About Virginia Woolf par. 1). We begin to see more depth in the feelings that Clarissa experiences after she isolates herself from the world in the "tower" of her remote bedroom (Woolf 31). We learn that the relationship between her and her husband is not one of passion or physical romance, much like the reported relationship between Virginia Woolf and her husband. There is certainly love and cooperation, but not a passionate romance. Clarissa is ill and sleeps alone, but has no cold feelings toward him. She sometimes feels distanced by his conservative politics and social status, but there is nevertheless a type of partnership. Moreover, her need to temporarily rest that afternoon is partially due to a heart condition, which was, according to Woolf's diaries, one shared by the author who suffered from palpitations and migraines, among other maladies (Ingram par. 8). In her room, Clarissa instead recalls a time in her past when her childhood friend Sally Seton kissed her, and it was the first (and possibly only) moment of passionate physical contact for Clarissa. She thinks back, "The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloway-the-self-characterization-and-introspection-of-virginia-woolf/>

one's feeling for a man (Woolf 34)" and " Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! (Woolf 35)" This is clearly a parallel between the protagonist and Woolf, who may have had romantic relationships with Madge Vaughan (on whom Sally is based) and later her publisher Vita Sackville-West (Cameron, About Mrs. Dalloway par. 3 & Bloom par. 17). Clarissa is drawn to the brash and free-spirited Sally, and given that Clarissa and Virginia both grew up in Victorian England, such a relationship was taboo, and thus may be (within that social context) categorized as impulsive, manic-depressive behavior (Purse par. 7). But Clarissa offers only partial insight into the psyche of the author. She is offset by Septimus Warren Smith, who also undergoes dramatic changes in the post-war era. Septimus, like Woolf, held great appreciation for literary works. Prior to the war he was a scholar of Shakespeare and other classics (as we find through his and Rezia's memories), and represents the intellectual side of the author before being destroyed by mental illness (Woolf 85). When he goes to war, however, he is faced with the death of his dear friend, Evans, and believes he simply does not feel the pain of the loss. In reality, he has lost his ability to feel anything, and begins his descent into madness. Similarly, the death of Julia Stephen marked Woolf's first mental breakdown, followed by another breakdown and suicide attempt (by jumping out a window) after the death of her father (Bloom par. 2 & 5). Though Septimus only makes a few appearances in the book, his role is crucial to filling in the darker depressive and insane spaces of Woolf's personality that are not covered by the hypomanic and functional side portrayed by Clarissa Dalloway. The first thoughts of his wife Rezia are that of a deeply saddened and overwhelmingly frustrated and embarrassed woman whose husband has

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been taken away by madness. She steps away from her delusional husband who is babbling to the dead Evans, and becomes bitter. “ Lucrezia Warren Smith was saying to herself, It’s wicked; why should I suffer? she was asking, as she walked down the broad path. No; I can’t stand it any longer, she was saying, having left Septimus, who wasn’t Septimus any longer, to say hard, cruel, wicked things, to talk to himself, to talk to a dead man, on the seat over there (Woolf 65).” The feelings projected on Rezia are most likely the same feelings that Woolf believed her husband may have experienced when she suffered a breakdown (characterized too, by depression, delusions and hearing voices) shortly after their marriage (Bloom par. 9). Much of the Warren Smith marriage in fact parallels that of Woolf and her husband, beginning with both Septimus and Woolf marrying out of a need for stability during wartime. Clearly the war played a central role in both marriages: Septimus married an Italian woman (not his love) in order to restore normalcy to his life, whereas Woolf and her husband married shortly before the war, but were deeply affected by it and later swore a suicide pact prior to WWII that they would both kill themselves if the Nazis invaded England (Cameron, About Virginia Woolf par. 6). Like Septimus, Woolf also suffered from disturbing mental neuroses, none of which were properly diagnosed by any doctors (Ingram par. 8). In the novel, the doctors tell Rezia that there is no diagnosis for his behavior - that he simply needs to be kept busy. Faithfully, Rezia does just that by taking him for walks, and trying to keep his mind and body occupied despite her desperate desire to get out of the marriage. Like Rezia, Woolf’s husband tried to deal with his wife’s madness in the same way her doctors recommended, and in 1917, they purchased a second-hand printing press and started the Hogarth Press (Bloom par. 10). <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloway-the-self-characterization-and-introspection-of-virginia-woolf/>

Like her literary counterparts though, the press only temporarily offered relief, and generally fostered manic episodes of mental occupation followed by intense depressive swings, much like Septimus's final episode prior to his death. It is this final episode that begins to draw Clarissa and Septimus together. In an instant of clarity, Septimus becomes functional. Like the more characteristic behavior of Clarissa, he displays joyful, creative abilities: "For the first time for days he was speaking as he used to do! ... He took it out of her hands. He said it was an organ grinder's monkey's hat. How it rejoiced her that! Not for weeks had they laughed like this together, poking fun privately like married people (Woolf 143)." Such an episode is described as the old, normal self for Septimus, though shortly thereafter he jumps out a window to his death. Even though he did not want to die, his "normal" or functional period was obviously followed by a state of decreased inhibition. Thus, this episode may be another manifestation of the manic state, denoted by temporary clarity and elation, shared by the author (Purse, par. 7). What is particularly important to both Septimus's and Clarissa's characters is that Woolf had originally planned to have Clarissa commit suicide in the end, but decided instead to create another character, Septimus Warren Smith to take the fall instead (Cameron, About Mrs. Dalloway par. 4). This splitting is significant because it serves to allow the story to believably take place over the course of 24 hours, as well as give Woolf an opportunity to have the central character reflect upon the death and learn from it, rather than simply experience it. Septimus realizes there is no escape from madness; the doctors cannot help him, and all that is left is a future of personal torture and agonizing pain for his beloved caretaker, his wife. He pauses at the windowsill, "But he would wait until the very last moment. He did not want

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to die. Life was good (Woolf 149).” Thus Septimus’s end is not meant to be seen as a release, but as the only unfortunate solution to incurable madness. When Woolf herself finally ended her life, she wrote in her suicide note: I feel certain that I am going mad again: I feel we can’t go through another of those terrible times. And I shan’t recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and can’t concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness... I can’t fight it any longer, I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work (Grohol par. 4). For Clarissa, the final pages of the story allow her to realize the importance of her parties through the loss of life. Her parties are not superficial socialite activities, but something much deeper, something the author herself wishes to have: togetherness. Even in his most deranged states, Septimus cries out for communion and companionship: “

Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication – he muttered (Woolf 93).” Woolf wrote in her diaries that insanity was complete and total isolation (Grohol par. 2), and isolation, according to her essay *Death of a Moth*, was death. Consequently, Clarissa’s parties represent the bringing together of lives, thus creating life through togetherness and combating the isolation of insanity. In one sense, Woolf departs from both Septimus and Clarissa at this point, because the period between when Septimus commits suicide and when Clarissa realizes the importance of her social gatherings is a fork in the road for Woolf. One character lives and accepts the deeper hidden pain in her life, while the other ends it all because there is no alternative escape from the madness. Works Cited Woolf, Virginia S. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1981 “What is Bipolar Disorder?”

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