

# Mrs. dalloway's impact on gender equality



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The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed significant strides in the upheaval of gender bias and patriarchal standards. Women gained many more liberties, such as with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, and the first wave of feminism was at its golden age. However, gender roles, or ideals of how the binary genders should act, still had a strong hold over societal expectations. When Virginia Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway* in the 1920's, she used it as a social critique of the strict gender roles in the time. The protagonists Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith both struggle to meet emotional gender expectations; however, only Clarissa can manage to hide her differences and remain a well-esteemed upper class woman.

When Septimus Warren Smith is a young adult, he volunteers for the army. However, when he returns it became clear that the war took a significant psychological toll on Septimus. His wife, Rezia, believes that " he was not Septimus now" (2350), recalling how he would " talk to himself, talk to a dead man" (2371). Septimus is showing signs of shell shock, a common diagnosis for a World War I veteran. However, such a disorder carried a complex stigma. Veterans showing symptoms of shell shock were thought to be showing qualities of femininity and therefore less of a man (Tomes). While Septimus worries that " he could not feel" (2383), he actually ends up showing more emotion than considered acceptable for a man, " cry[ing] out about human cruelty" (2410) and writing about " universal love: the meaning of the world" (2413). Rezia becomes embarrassed by him. She thinks it is " the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus who had fought, who was brave, crying" (2410). This adds another layer of strain on their

marriage. It leads her to even claim, " Far rather would she be that he were dead! She could not sit beside him..." (2349). Because Septimus cannot be a mentally strong man, Rezia becomes ashamed of him.

Similarly, Clarissa Dalloway struggles with her ability to fulfill the female gender role on an emotional level, worrying that she is not satisfying her husband. She claims that " she could see what she lacked... It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman..." (2354). Other characters have noticed this same absence of what they consider an essential quality. Peter believes that " there was always something cold in Clarissa" (2363)— a certain " woodenness" (2369). This quality of warmth that Clarissa lacks is a quality connected with a feminine character, and more specifically, a proper wife. This in turn leads her to the conclusion that " she had failed him [her husband]" (2354).

These two protagonists seem to differ in their abilities to hide the fact that they do not fit within their prescribed gender role. Septimus's physical appearance points to his nonconformity. When he is a young adult, he wears a " pink, innocent oval" face and is often seen as too feminine (2381). His boss thinks that he " looks weakly" and worries about his health (2382). During the war, Septimus appears to have physically " developed manliness" (2382). However, something in his appearance leads to a feeling of discomfort. Maisie Johnson thinks that he and Rezia look very " queer" (2351), and Sir William Bradshaw " could see the first moment they came into the room... [that Septimus] was a case of extreme gravity" (2387). He cannot control his behavior in public, and that in combination with his

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strange appearance leads to his inability to hide his odd personality and lack of conformity with the masculine gender role.

On the other hand, Clarissa manages to hide her different nature from public eyes. She has a " narrow pea-stick figure" and " nice hands and feet" (2342). She also thinks that she " dressed well" (2342) and impressed Peter at her party by wearing " earrings, and a silver-green mermaid's dress" (2426). These give her a very feminine appearance, allowing her to convince strangers that she fits the feminine gender role. She also puts up a facade to hide her emotional inadequacies. While walking to Bond Street, she reflects on this separation of selfs:

She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being

No more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and

Rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway;

not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (2342)

Clarissa hides behind her married, public self. This Mrs. Dalloway is the " perfect hostess" that throws the wonderful parties (2342). She personally welcomes every guest as they enter, exclaiming, " How delightful to see you!" at every arrival (2423). She does this to uphold her public self, although she thinks "... it was too much of an effort. She was not enjoying it" (2425). Still, these parties are how she manages to cope with her struggle

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with gender roles. She explains that they are “ an offering”, and although the characters do not understand what she means, it gives her comfort to think of the events in that way (2400).

In Woolf's novel, she reveals that gender roles still make a significant impact in British society at the time, and shows that they have negative impacts.

Although Clarissa manages to bypass social judgement and hide her nonconformity to the feminine gender role, both Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith struggle with fitting into the emotional expectations of their respective gender roles.