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Experience, Meaning of Life



Hannah Lucia Inkin - 11430532 ' Trauma and recovery in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway' by Karen DeMeester 'Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway' by Karen DeMeester explores the characterisation of Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway by highlighting not only the psychological detriments suffered by victims of relentless ordeals such as war but also the need for them to give value to their injuries in order for them to successfully recover. The article presents many supporting ideas. First of all, it states that Woolf's narrative mirrors that of a trauma survivor. It is certain that imagist poetry and experimental novels of the post-war era " reflect the fragmentation of consciousness and the disorder and confusion that a victim experiences in the wake of a traumatic event" which inevitably damages any sort of faith the victim may have ever had about himself in the past and makes it harder to find realistic ideologies that give meaning to their life after the trauma. DeMeester then links this notion to the fact that the stream-of-consciousness narrative corresponds to the survivor's perception of time which suggests that memories of such a trauma often exists in a present consciousness, therefore interrupting personal life and history. The event is subsequently such a critical incident in one's life however not one to define Septimus's identity. Furthermore, through this, Woolf combines the past and future with the present in a " continuous flow of narrative form". However, DeMeester also explains that quite like the survivor who is also trying to find the meaning of the trauma, the readers cannot apprehend the text chronologically because the meaning of the text does not emerge from " temporal" relationships but " spatial" ones. Likewise, the idea that repetition is key to Woolf's intentions of reflecting Septimus'

perception of space is then explored. It is suggested that this establishes a rhythm of futility which contributes to the inability in the novel to produce advancements in understanding and conclusions. Not only does this hold Septimus back from forward movements, but also from his recovery. Similarly, through this it becomes apparent that the way Woolf approaches this is ideal to depict trauma, but not necessarily recovery, which is what the entire novel is working towards. A valid argument is presented here as it's stated that "modernist literature defines the post-traumatic condition, but the task of giving individual and cultural meaning to the suffering falls to later generations of artists". Moreover, the only way for Septimus to recover from a private and self-reflexive view by reclaiming the past and piecing together fragments through a more communicable narrative. What drew me to this particular article is not just an ongoing fascination of the complexity of Septimus Smith, but the fact that his thoughts often ran parallel between what is considered sanity and insanity, which gets thinner and thinner. More importantly, he offers a strong contrast between the conscious struggle of the working class veteran and the blind opulence of the upper class. The troubles of the legitimacy of the English society he fought to maintain during the war were deemed questionable and DeMeester is able to integrate this in her article. She mentions that it is Septimus's identity as a war veteran which makes him a powerful tool to criticise the social system - this is demonstrated particularly by Clarissa Dalloway and doctors who continuously censor him which symbolises society's refusal to help him move on from such pain. There is a great deal of DeMeester's article that investigates conventional psychoanalytical interpretation. In turn, Septimus

being misdiagnosed with schizophrenia emphasises that he in fact suffers not from psychological pathology but psychological injury; this is what DeMeester believes many critics fail to recognise. Furthermore, this attributes to our understanding of war neurosis and the way it shatters one's identity. This inevitably leads us to delve more into the reason as to why Septimus is unable to recover. DeMeester makes it apparent that to recuperate, Septimus must communicate both mentally, emotionally and socially to validate the deaths of the soldiers he shared his experiences with and fulfill a prophetic role by instigating social change. While this seems like a quick solution for Septimus's ongoing problem, he faces a great deal of resistance from the community because his severe issues could dramatically damage the reputation of participating in the war. Again, this highlights Woolf's critique of English society. DeMeester states "the community wants him to be the man he was before the war--the man who was willing to die to preserve the community's social order" and in the end, his death is exactly that. Following Septimus's death, Clarissa Dalloway silences his suicide and devotes her life to repression by "perpetuating the status quo".

Furthermore, it is pointed out that this can be seen significantly when she refuses to interrupt the Prime Minister and Lady Bruton's conversation about India to inform them of Septimus's death, to ensure it "will not dispel its magic or the illusion of harmony and order it creates". In addition, this blatant hypocrisy is greatly unimpressive when Clarissa recommits to a life of superficial existence, a loss of identity and individuality and social order she believes is so oppressive. This article proved to be an extremely beneficial to my understanding of the book, opening my mind to

explanations I may have not previously considered. I believe it successfully explores the psychoanalytical details of Septimus while investigating the political and social flaws also. However, I do regard some of the information to be repeated at points - perhaps this is DeMeester's approach to emphasising a particular notion, but Clarissa Dalloway's characterisation and role could have been explored a lot deeper. Works Cited http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v044/44_3demeester.html Karen DeMeester. 'Trauma and recovery in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway', MFS, Modern Fiction Studies, Volume 44, number 3, Fall, 1998, 649-673. Please note, I have not referenced quotes as the source of the article in which I used did not provide any tools to do so. Word Count: 972