

Masculinity in Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Mrs. Dalloway is a complex and compelling modernist novel by Virginia Woolf. In the novel, published in 1925, Woolf comes up with a new literary form using which she reveals her views of political, economical and social issues artistically in her work. Virginia Woolf's short stories, essays, letters, diaries and novels are full of criticism of the social structure. For example, in her first novel, *Night and Day* (1919), she criticizes the patriarchal dividend in the family that enslaves women. In her novels ranging from the first one to the last, she works towards exploring the relation between the household and public effect of the patriarchal society and between male predominance and female subservience.

In her diary entry of 19 June 1923, Woolf writes: 'In this book, I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity. I want to criticise the social system, and show it at work, at its most intense.' Critics have continually overlooked her intentions in writing *Mrs. Dalloway*.

According to them, she has been concerned with private consciousness, which incorporates the personal and individual world of her characters in the novel. They are somewhat correct in their explanation, as it cannot be ignored that the characters are engaged in their own private consciousness, for they desire to make their own space in the stark reality of the external world.

Woolf presents conventional male characters like Richard Dalloway, Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, who indicate the cultural values and preserve the authority of patriarchy in the society. They are the sustainers of what Richard Dalloway describes as "our detestable social system", which

manifests itself in the power of patriarchy as possession and order.

Contradictorily, Richard Dalloway, Dr. Holmes, and Sir Bradshaw demand on retaining the “ continuity” of this “ detestable social system” (p. 104), so that people like Septimus Warren Smith leave for France to save England and its social structure. Septimus, a veteran of World War 1, suffers from shellshock, which leads him into rejecting the long-established meaning of war and social order. Dr. Holmes and Bradshaw decide to send him to a mental hospital in the countryside, where he will conform to the conventions of the society. Paradoxically, it is to be noticed that Septimus was the man who was prepared to die to conserve the country’s social order (p. 87).

Septimus goes to France during the first World War to protect England, and for the expansion of the country’s power, as fighting in the war is historically and traditionally the duty of men. Millicent Bruton, at her lunch gathering, compliantly becomes pleased of her family as she looks at the picture on the wall, which had “ her family, of military men, administrators, admirals.” (p. 99). She also mentions that it is Richard’s first duty “ was to his country” (p. 99). Septimus, also being an ambitious individual as the men in the picture, had developed a deep “ love of England” (p. 47). He also develops “ manliness” and is “ promoted” for serving with excellence in the war (p. 77). His emotional side is seen when hallucinations of his friend Evans, whom he loved and had lost in the war, appear and haunt him: “ the war was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself” (p. 63) and “ ‘ Evans, Evans!’ he cried” (p. 83). Septimus lives in his own mind, where is he is out of the touch of reality, that is, he sees and hears that are only present in his mind. He is

extremely emotionally attached to his friend, Evans that he claims to have conversations with Evans.

Septimus finds himself in conflict with the masculine perspective of war and regards this view as primitive. Peter Walsh, another character who deviates from being completely 'masculine', supports this view when he watches boys marching in uniform and feels pity for them because they "don't know the troubles of the flesh yet" (p. 47).

Richard Dalloway, on the other hand, believes fighting wars is noble. It is hard for him to view it as destructive. He is presented as a conventional male character, that is, he is simple and sensible, and believes in living a stable life with his wife. Richard, like most men, lacks the ability to completely communicate, which is seen when he wishes to express his love for Clarissa as he offers her flowers, but eventually stays quiet because of his stiffness and perhaps his fear of being embarrassed. He also lacks the ability to acknowledge the pleasure in little things of life in the way Clarissa can. Richard regards tradition of foremost significance as opposed to passion or open communication. Woolf uses his character to portray the predominance of men and the patriarchal dividend in the society. Richard disregards the potential of his daughter, Elizabeth, as woman, much as he does in the case of Clarissa. Elizabeth considers occupational choices but Richard overlooks this fact and pays no attention. Richard likes that women prefer his company, but many times his presumption is wrong.

Peter Walsh, as opposed to the character of Richard, has a dynamic disposition, always wandering, and completely adventurous. Peter Walsh's most constant aspect of character is ambivalence: he is middle-aged and fears he has wasted his life, but sometimes he also feels he is not yet old. He is unable to commit to a particular, or even to a romantic partner. He is also unable to decide what he feels and tries often to talk himself into feeling or not feeling certain notions. This is seen when he spends the day telling himself that he no longer loves Clarissa, but his sorrow at losing her is visible when he is in her presence, and his passion for her suggests that he is still tempted by her and may even yearn for a revived romance. When he musters up his rage toward Clarissa and tells her about his new love, he is unable to tolerate the anger and eventually weeps.

Peter Walsh consistently twiddles with his pocketknife, and the continual opening, closing, and fiddling with the knife suggest his evasive nature and inability to decide. Peter cannot describe his own identity, and his consistent fiddling with the knife suggests how nervous he is with his masculinity. Peter acts as a contrast to Richard, who is stable, generous, and quite simple. In contrast to calm Richard, Peter is energetic, spirited, passionate, and unpredictable even to himself.

Woolf embodies her messages in every character, each one portraying a different aspect of society. Where Peter Walsh symbolizes liberality and open-communication, Septimus represents the futility of war. He evokes feelings of pity towards those who are incapacitated, therefore standing for equality in society. Through Richard, she criticizes the patriarchal aspect of

society. Therefore, Woolf uses the novel as a vehicle for criticism of the society of her day.

Bibliography

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