

# Mrs dalloway's criticism of societal conventions



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Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* criticizes societal conventions as it portrays the internal thoughts of its protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway, and the various characters that surround her in post-World War I London. Woolf illustrates the mental repercussions of the war and the past in general through the perspectives of individuals from a variety of different backgrounds and experiences. The two central characters of the narrative, Clarissa and Septimus, initially could not appear more different. Septimus is a male war veteran suffering from undiagnosed PTSD while Clarissa is a female matriarch who dedicates her life to trying to maintain a sane composition. Arguably, the decision to make the male foil the one "diagnosed" with insanity might be a result of Woolf's feminism but, with access to her internal thoughts, we quickly see that Clarissa isn't as sane as she initially appears. Woolf juxtaposes Clarissa and Septimus to illustrate the inability to escape from societal oppression, except through death, and the consequences of choosing whether or not to sacrifice one's soul in order to conform.

Both Septimus and Clarissa are trapped by societal subjugation; the two are victims of disingenuous relationships, emotional repression, a social pressure to conform, and the inevitable passing of time. Clarissa and Septimus are stuck in degrading marriages that lacked a strong foundation to begin with. While we are given obvious textual evidence about Clarissa's affair with Sally Seton, Woolf suggests that Septimus may have also been in love with another man he served in the war with: Evans. Septimus claims that he is guilty of a "sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst," (89) but he obsesses so regularly about Evan's death that it is impossible to

believe he does not care. Clarissa, too, is forced to portray herself differently to the world than how she feels internally. Unlike Septimus, Clarissa feels too much – about Sally, about what people think about her, and about the past. This homoerotic behavior and insecurity contribute heavily to the deterioration of Septimus and Clarissa's marriage, other relationships and, consequently, their mental stability. Physically, the two are compared to birds: Clarissa has “ [the] touch of the bird about her, of the jay... there she perched,” while Septimus is depicted as “ beak-nosed” (4, 14). This comparison to birds, especially “ perched” birds, illustrates the desire in both Clarissa and Septimus to be free. Furthermore, Septimus commits suicide by literally flying out of a window, escaping the “ cage” that is society. Septimus is repressed by his doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, who “ swoops” and “ devours,” as though he were a bird of prey (99). Sir William worships conformity, and prescribes Septimus means to “ cure” who he has become with the intent of shaping him to fit the ideal, obedient social mold.

Clarissa and Septimus's infatuation with death connects them while simultaneously illustrating that the only escape from societal oppression is through dying. While Septimus obsesses over Evan's death, Clarissa is infatuated with the inevitability of her own. Both protagonists see death as a victory, though neither of them desires to die. Clarissa believes that death is an “ attempt to communicate,” that it provides an “ embrace” (180). She explicitly says that she does not pity Septimus after he has killed himself. Death provides a communication with others that Clarissa and Septimus do not have while they survive as outcasts. After Septimus kills himself, his wife, Rezia, “ ran to the window, she saw; she understood” (146). This is the first

evidence we have of Rezia finally accepting Septimus for who he has become. And, while Septimus claims that he does not want to die immediately before his suicide, it is a sacrifice he makes in order to hold on to his true self and his soul at the expense of his physical body. Additionally, Septimus and Clarissa reference the line "Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages" from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* throughout the novel. The line is adapted from a funeral song that welcomes death as an escape from the burdens of life. While neither character physically or mentally fits a conventional societal mold, their souls are designed for nobody's acceptance but their own. Thus, Septimus ironically has no place in life until his death, and Clarissa never truly finds herself or her happiness in the novel.

Clarissa and Septimus's obsession with protecting their souls from the societal pressure to conform drives them to insanity. Through access to both characters' internal thoughts, however, we see that "sanity" is entirely relative. Clarissa may have more control over her fears and emotions than Septimus but, as readers, we see that her stability is equally compromised. Through Septimus, an "outcast who gazed back at the inhabited regions," (101) it is evident that insanity is a consequence of a lack of connection and a displacement from society. As follows, it is arguable that Clarissa is on the brink of madness. Clarissa feels "far out to sea and alone;" (8) she is insecure about the role that she plays in society, and claims that "she had the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown" (10). Clarissa feels misunderstood and has no secure relationship to provide her with someone she can confide in; Septimus, ironically, wishes to be left alone.

Both characters are obsessed with protecting the privacy of their souls but, while Clarissa compromised her passion and her soul when she married Richard, Septimus preserved his soul by choosing death. Septimus is, in this manner, reborn while Clarissa suffers from “ an emptiness about the heart of life” (30). Septimus sacrifices his mind and body for his soul, but Clarissa sacrifices her soul for her mind and body. In order to be accepted by society, Clarissa sacrifices the happiness that she would have attained through pursuing her relationship with Sally for a future, while Septimus sacrificed his future for preserving his spirit. Both decisions illustrate the pressure and madness that social norms and pressure to conform inflict upon individuals. Clarissa and Septimus were simultaneously victims of serious battles; Clarissa suffered from an internal battle between whom she genuinely loved but took the safe road by marrying Richard, while Septimus took the dangerous road and fought an external battle, which resulted in a perpetual internal battle with his sanity. Losing people they loved made them mad, but losing themselves made them insane.

Our sanity is arguably the most important part of the human psyche, but the uncensored internal thoughts of Clarissa and Septimus prove that it is entirely subjective. There is no such thing as “ the real world.” Clarissa’s definition of the “ real world” differs from Septimus’s, and both of their perspectives are completely unique to the other characters in the novel. The “ real world” is less real, and more so a combination of rules and inventions designed by man: time, social norms, laws, and morals, etc. While all of these every-day characteristics add routine and order to human lifestyles, they can also be the cause of isolation and madness, as observed in Mrs.

Dalloway. The theme of protecting the soul, one's true self independent of what is socially acceptable, illuminates the internal struggle between being truly yourself, and being the version of yourself that others have designed.