

Interpreting virginia woolf's homosexual subtext in mrs dalloway



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How does Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway intentionally show Woolf's lesbian-feminist critique of the institution of marriage and acknowledge the competing discourses of lesbianism and male homosexuality? Eileen Barrett's "Unmasking Lesbian Passion: The Inverted World of Mrs. Dalloway" answers the question showing that Woolf used her text to inform the reader of her views. The probable thesis of the article is that Virginia Woolf's critique of marriage shows how the institution of marriage obscures a woman's independent spirit and identity.

And further it ruins men who are attracted to their own sex and reveals the unseen pain of the women married to them. Also in her article, Barrett goes into depth about each character's significance in explaining the opposing views on homosexuality during the time Woolf wrote the book. Barrett conveys that Woolf's representations of same sex love in her characters reflects her feminist sensibility and the influence sexologists had at the time.

Barrett theorizes that Woolf felt that sexologists were perverting the erotic language of romantic friendship and perpetuating homophobia and self hatred. Also, Barrett documents that Virginia Woolf and her contemporaries, especially in the Bloomsbury Group, discussed these topics, among many, thoroughly and the resulting opinions are freely seen throughout the text. To help aid the reader in understanding her theory, first Barrett outlines the history of how views on homosexuality formed and differed during Woolf's time.

Barrett details how many of the sexologists of the time believed that homosexual women and men were suffering from what was referred to as,

sexual inversion. Sexual inversion is what most people refer to as transgender today. What the idea held was that the homosexual person was displaying the mannerisms of the opposite sex and the person felt they were of the other sex trapped within their body and soul. This theory was also known as the "trapped soul theory" and in her article Barrett cites that more homosexual men in the literary world were inclined to acknowledge this women.

To help push their views, the sexologists agreed that while oppression was not the cure, suppression of the movement and immersing oneself in religion would lead a person to resist the temptations or desires. The sexologists easily achieved their goals of impacting peoples opinions, especially through the pushing of the doctrine that homosexuality was indicative of "developmental degeneration or insanity" (Barrett 148). Interestingly enough, it is only in the last few decades that the medical community continued has changed their definitions and treatments for homosexuals needing mental health help.

Barrett's article then goes into detail about how Woolf had a very strong stance towards marriage and it's effects on women. And references that many of the feminists Woolf associated with actually rejected the idea of marriage and chose to live their lives with women instead. There is no doubt that this had an affect on Woolf and the way that she conveyed this view in Mrs. Dalloway. Clarissa gives us a glimpse into the life of a woman who once was independent and choose to give that up for the stability of marriage or social class.

Woolf also shows us this in characters like Evelyn Whitbread, who has had more of a physical response to marriage with her suffering from “ some internal ailment” (Woolf 6) and similarly Lady Bradshaw who had “ cramped, squeezed, pared, pruned” for her husband the “ great doctor” (Woolf 101). In essence she “ had gone under. It was nothing you could put your finger on; there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, water-logged , of her will into his” (Woolf 100).

Barrett also confirms that Lastly Barrett summarizes that Woolf used many of her characters including Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith and Doris Kilman, to remark about the competing views of homosexuality during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As sort of an introduction to the idea, Barrett brings to light first the relationship between Sally and Clarissa which is seen as a romantic friendship which Clarissa has rationalized to herself.

Barrett goes on to reason that the portrayal of Septimus shows the consequences that plagued the males of homosexual persuasion during Woolf's time and that the view that their “ crime” was a crime against nature. Thirdly Barrett discusses Doris Kilman and how she embodies many of the negative characteristics ascribed to lesbian feminists by sexologists at the time. Barrett also includes the “ ambivalent” Clarissa who reflects the conflict among divergent depictions of lesbian passion.

Clarissa has in fact rejected the idea that her same sex love of Sally is a crime against nature, while at the same time projected onto Doris the negative stereotypes. I found the article to be extremely interesting in

regards that in introduced me to the history of what the sexologists were informing the public at the time the book was written and Virginia's Woolf's response. It also drew the correlation for me that sometimes the line can be blurred for some people about the differences between feminism and lesbianism.

Personally I support both but don't correlate the two, growing up in the 80s and 90s and especially in a place so close to San Francisco the gay rights movement is seen more clearly than any more women's liberation movements. I also enjoyed the way Barrett itemized each character or relationship to indicate how Woolf was pushing all sides of the issue at once. Reading the article helped give me a more poignant view of how Woolf must have felt at the time.