

Mrs. dalloway's unification of social boundaries



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A slim volume seldom exceeding two-hundred pages, a cursory survey of Mrs. Dalloway hardly suggests the astronomical weight of literary and social significance critics have harvested from Woolf's prose since its publication in 1925. At once revered as Britain's archetypal post-war elegy, a twentieth-century feminist vindication, and a brave illustration of queer life blending into the fabric of a formerly monochromatic western liberalism, Woolf's svelte masterpiece unwaveringly rivals the significance of even the most opaque literary anvils among its stream-of-consciousness brethren. However, while feminists, queer theorists, and post-war philosophers alike argue for the right to claim the novel as canonical to their own ideology, Mrs. Dalloway's remarkable ability to transcend and unite social boundaries perhaps stems merely from a simple - and decidedly less optimistic - truth. Beneath differences in both sex and sexuality, the novel's characters are united - or rather, estranged - by the inherent isolation of each individual. If Woolf transcends social boundaries, she does so only as a serendipitous byproduct of revealing the ultimate isolation intrinsic to human consciousness.

While Mrs. Dalloway is an earlier manifestation of the stream-of-consciousness style of which Woolf eventually became a leading figurehead, the novel contains the same emphasis on the isolated nature of individual consciousness that would later dominate *The Waves*, in which six characters never once directly address each other for the duration of the novel (Mulas, 75). Stream-of-consciousness narration itself produces and ensures isolation almost by definition, and although Mrs. Dalloway's characters do interact, it is not without difficulty - their often strained and unfulfilling dialogue

maintaining Kathryn Van Wert's assertion that "the novel's primary interest is the nature of the mind" (Van Wert, 79). This inherent isolation, however, is not in itself the root of human suffering in Mrs. Dalloway. Like Albert Camus's "absurd" – inevitable suffering resulting from a conflict between man's desire for meaning in life and an inability to find any – suffering in Mrs. Dalloway results from a need for human connection and an inability to transcend the boundaries inherent to consciousness (Camus, 11). Plagued by "the feeling they had of dissatisfaction; not knowing people; not being known" and unable to fully accept the reality of their isolation, characters repeatedly construct frail bridges over their gaps in consciousness in order to preserve an acceptable public image (Woolf, 152). Whether in the form of marriage, religion, or parties, Woolf's characters unsuccessfully seek to fill the voids left by the impossibility of human connection with an almost Lacanian futility.

Ultimately, Woolf spares only one character from further Sisyphean torment, with Septimus Warren Smith's climactic leap out the window and famously cryptic last words, "I'll give it you!" Largely misunderstood by other characters, Septimus's suicide is received by doctors as an act of cowardice and by an initially indignant Clarissa as a rather unwelcome intrusion on her party. While Clarissa does later experience a kind of telepathic empathy with Septimus, she too fails to fully comprehend his death – an act John McGuigan illuminates as "neither one of despair... nor of psychosis, [but] instead a defiant cry against institutional society, an assertion of free will when faced with the prospect of having none." Essentially, Septimus escapes from the cyclical masquerade with which the other characters continuously struggle to

veil their fractured existence. Septimus's death, far from its common reception as a "shell-shocked veteran's decision to 'throw it all away,'" is actually a victorious leap to freedom, one which he alone among Woolf's cast dares to make (McGuigan, 123). In suicide, Septimus leaves Clarissa "forced to stand there in her evening dress" (Woolf 185) along with the rest of Woolf's hopeless ensemble, thus establishing himself - over his double - as the true hero of the novel which bears her name.

This notion of duality between Clarissa and Septimus is far from a novel concept, and is in fact one Woolf herself conveniently illuminated in her diaries. This gift is not one scholars have hesitated to take advantage of, with Alex Page prefacing his 1961 analysis of the doubles with the acknowledgement that "a number of important parallels have already been pointed out by distinguished commentators." Essentially, Woolf's exposure of the duality combined with decades of academic commentary almost renders further discussion of the Septimus-Clarissa dichotomy blatantly superfluous. However, while the characters' dual nature lends itself to a variety of interpretations including feminist and queer readings, almost all analyses rely on the same foundational skeleton of "the eminently sane Clarissa and the pathetically insane Septimus." Essentially, Septimus is regularly presented as a lesser, more dangerous or flawed Clarissa, "a warning that beneath Clarissa's regulated, shiny life lies an abyss" (Page, 412; 413; 414). With this prototype of the Septimus-Clarissa duality, commentators fall into the same misconceptions of Septimus that the other characters themselves exhibit, perpetuating an image of Septimus as something to be pitied or feared. Contrary to Page's interpretation, Septimus

is not the embodiment of Clarissa's "abyss." Rather, Septimus struggles against the abyss in his own right. Moreover, unlike his double, Septimus manages to escape it. Under this consideration, a general restructuring of the traditional Septimus-Clarissa blueprint is necessary.

Of the many parallels between Clarissa and Septimus, among the most fundamental is a shared need for privacy. This observation in itself is nothing groundbreaking, Woolf establishing Clarissa's need for privacy early on, particularly in the depiction of her marriage. In musing on her choice between two suitors, Peter and Richard, Clarissa reaffirms her decision, remarking, "In marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him." Clarissa maintains this opinion, later claiming, "There is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; that one must respect...for one would not part with it... without losing one's independence, something, after all, priceless." Clarissa goes on to define this sacred independence as "the privacy of the soul," (Woolf 8; 120; 127).

Clarissa's double, Septimus Warren Smith, exhibits similar qualities of introversion and fear of the outside world. From his first appearance, Woolf paints Septimus as an apprehensive figure, whose very eyes echo the question, "The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" This question mirrors Clarissa's own fear that "it was very, very dangerous to live even one day." While Clarissa eventually defines her ultimate goal as "the privacy of the soul," Septimus defines the ultimate threat to privacy as "

human nature,” explaining that “ human nature, in short, was on him...Once you stumble, human nature is on you” (Woolf 14; 8; 92).

Both fearing the inauthenticity of the public realm and the threat it poses to privacy, the primary distinction between Clarissa and Septimus emerges in their vastly different methods of dispelling this fear. Septimus's attempts to maintain his privacy are thwarted by Dr. Holmes - a figure so threatening that Septimus comes to see him as the embodiment of human nature itself, claiming, “ Human nature was on him, the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him.” Recognizing, as Septimus points out, that “ once you stumble,” the threat to privacy is intensified, Clarissa attempts to protect herself from the outside world by sacrificing some of her privacy in the form of hosting parties, explaining simply, “ They're an offering” (Woolf, 92; 121).

This notion of Clarissa's parties as a form of personal sacrifice is one Jacob Littleton largely overlooks in his assertion that the parties are in fact “ a way for her to strengthen collective being... Her parties are her art.” Littleton's analysis paints an image of Clarissa Dalloway as a kind of existentialist hero, whose very “ existence profoundly controverts the ideology and power relations of her cultural sphere.” Littleton bathes Clarissa's parties in a pool of optimism, citing them as evidence that their hostess “ rejects society's common props against the void.” Littleton's praise continues, exalting his existentialist heroine as one who “ must face disordered reality without accepted props and create her own meaning for it.” Amongst these “ props” which Clarissa supposedly so bravely rejects, Littleton includes Doris Kilman's religious fervor as well as Peter Walsh's love affairs. Indeed, <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloways-unification-of-social-boundaries/>

Clarissa does directly condemn both Kilman and Walsh for their dependence on these institutions, implicating them both with the indignant avowal that “love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul” (Woolf, 127). However, neither Clarissa nor Littleton succeed in providing any evidence that Clarissa’s parties are not themselves merely another “prop against the void.” Ultimately, Littleton himself even acknowledges that Clarissa’s parties “spring from Dalloway’s sense of her own isolation as an individual” (Littleton 42, 36, 37, 46).

Kilman’s religion, Peter’s engagement, and Clarissa’s parties, then, are all merely props - unstable bridges across the voids separating their isolated consciousness. In their attempts to fill these voids, characters unwittingly enact their own kind of Lacanian cycle. Flowers are a particularly prominent Lacanian symbol throughout the novel, repeatedly surfacing as substitutions for a lack of real intimacy or meaning. This symbol of course makes its first appearance in the novel’s famous opening line, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (Woolf, 3). Seemingly a declaration of agency and independence, this assertion is tempered in the next paragraph, with the narrator listing the reasons - reading more like excuses - that lead Clarissa to this decision. The reasons the narrator provides on Clarissa’s behalf ring insubstantial and largely unconvincing, with Clarissa’s last reason - nice weather - striking a final hollow note (Woolf, 3). Essentially, from the first page of the novel, Clarissa is already using flowers as a substitution - this time, as an excuse to take action when none is truly needed of her.

Flowers make another notable appearance later on, presented in the significant absence of true intimacy. In perhaps the novel’s most blatant

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depiction of failed communication, Richard Dalloway finds himself unable to tell his wife he loves her, instead merely presenting roses. The roses resurface within Clarissa's focalized consciousness for some time after their initial reception, perhaps nowhere more tellingly than in the seemingly fragmented thought, " There were his roses. Her parties!" (Woolf, 121). Here, Woolf directly links Clarissa's parties to the roses, uniting them in their futility as substitutions for human connection. The roses function not only as a substitution for the lack of true intimacy between Clarissa and Richard, but also as a symbol of the general pattern of substitution that lurks throughout the novel.

Here, of course, is where Clarissa and her double split. While Clarissa yields to the demands of the public realm, Septimus maintains his aversion to the " inauthentic connection and failed intimacy" which Clarissa fosters - both in her marriage and in her parties. Where Clarissa accepts roses in place of love, Septimus ultimately refuses to compromise. Realizing that he cannot escape the threat of human nature as Holmes approaches up the stairs, Septimus leaps to his death " with his personal sovereignty intact" (McGuigan, 133).

While this uncompromised sovereignty is not something Clarissa shares with her double, she does - at least partially - recognize it. Upon hearing of the suicide, Clarissa instinctively acknowledges it as an act of preservation, observing, " A thing there was that mattered...This he had preserved. Death was defiance. There was an embrace in death." Taking a moment of privacy from her guests, Clarissa cements the Septimus duality with the claim, " she felt somehow very like him... She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it

away.” However, Clarissa’s moment of privacy is only temporary. Unlike Septimus, who has refused to compromise, Clarissa is in the midst of a sacrifice to which she must return. In death, Septimus thwarts human nature absolutely, and wraps himself in complete privacy. Clarissa, meanwhile, remains chained to the public realm, and must return to her guests and the outside world. Through his suicide, Septimus accomplishes the goal that Clarissa’s “horror of death” prevents her from ever completing. In triumphing over this fear and accomplishing his goal before Clarissa ever can, Septimus establishes himself the true hero of Woolf’s novel (Woolf 184, 186, 153).

This “horror of death” is a fundamental aspect of Clarissa’s character – the deciding factor that cements her fate in contrast with Septimus’s. This factor is often overlooked in analyses like Littleton’s, in which Clarissa-the-artist is fundamentally defined by “the pleasure she takes in physical, sensual existence.” Littleton even cites flowers among the supposedly defining aspects of this “sensual existence,” completely overlooking the novel’s repeated references to flowers as symbolic of inadequate substitutions. Essentially, Clarissa’s indulgence in the sensual world is not “the most fundamental fact of [her] psyche,” but rather merely another substitution (Littleton, 37). Recognizing a lack of inherent value in life, Clarissa accepts the physical world as a substitution for deeper meaning, just as she accepts Richard’s flowers in the absence of genuine emotion.

While Littleton does cite Clarissa’s “horror of death,” he attributes it to a “fear of the termination of the existence she loves so much” (Littleton, 38). However, given Clarissa’s earlier musings on the danger of life, it is clear <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloways-unification-of-social-boundaries/>

that she does not, in fact, love her existence – she is merely torn between equal fears of life and death. Noting that both Clarissa and Septimus reject life, the question, then, is not one of why “ Septimus disintegrates and Clarissa does not,” but rather why Septimus escapes and Clarissa does not (Wolfe, 44). The answer, of course, is that Clarissa remains paralyzed by her fear of death, one which Septimus overcomes. The common notion of Clarissa Dalloway's admirable resilience in the face of bourgeois monotony rapidly disintegrates with the revelation that Clarissa's perseverance in life is driven only by an equal and opposite fear of death.

With this reversal of the traditional Clarissa-Septimus framework, the various interpretations it has spawned suddenly start to ring hollow. In the absence of the shell-shocked veteran who succumbs while Clarissa perseveres, typical post-war, feminist, and queer readings in themselves seem to merely comprise Lacanian substitutions for the emptiness at the heart of Woolf's novel. These readings seek to provide answers, to explain away the pervasive isolation of Mrs. Dalloway. While comforting, these interpretations are no different than the substitutions Woolf's characters themselves attempt to implement – mere roses placed in a vain attempt to adorn the otherwise empty mantle of Mrs. Dalloway.

The typical post-war readings of the novel are perhaps the most convenient interpretations for readers who reject the novel's nihilistic undertones. This analysis provides an all-encompassing explanation both for Septimus's madness as well as the general disillusionment of the novel's other characters. Leaning on the monumental significance of the historical and social cornerstone that was the Great War, readers can be reassured that the <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloways-unification-of-social-boundaries/>

emptiness and madness of Mrs. Dalloway is simply a result of post-war ennui.

Sensing that the war may be a little too convenient of a backdrop against which to explain the entirety of Woolf's novel, Kathryn Van Wert challenges common post-war readings, suggesting that Woolf's primary use of the war is merely as "a trope for psychic turbulence...function[ing] as a metaphor for other forms of alienation." Van Wert notes the insubstantial textual presence of the war, ultimately suggesting that, rather than illustrating a collective consciousness "impinged on by the war," the majority of Woolf's characters seldom display anything more than a relatively fleeting, even flippant, acknowledgement of the event. In her analysis of Septimus, the presumed shell-shocked veteran, Van Wert points to early drafts of Mrs. Dalloway that include sketches of Septimus's character pre-war. Van Wert argues that the war "functions as a metaphor for complex metaphysical alienations that have defined [Septimus] since long before the war." Ultimately, Van Wert contends that "the fact that people have no lasting emotions ... is not something learned on the front" (Van Wert 75, 72, 71, 73). While a comforting reading, suffering in Mrs. Dalloway can be no more adequately attributed to the war than can flowers be substituted for love. Similarly, feminist and queer readings of the novel also tend to gloss over the isolation at the heart of Mrs. Dalloway. As previously noted, Littleton's analysis paints an incomplete portrait of Clarissa as feminist hero whose party-giving art form is a willful subversion of the "ideology and power relations of her sphere" (Littleton 36). Littleton's analysis, while uplifting, completely ignores the fact that Clarissa herself refers to her parties as an

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offering – a personal and compulsory sacrifice made to maintain her image in the public sphere.

Queer readings tend to be guilty of the same kind of far-fetched optimism, with commentators like Jesse Wolfe emphasizing the vivid nature of Clarissa's recollections of her homosexual encounters in contrast with the cold depiction of her heterosexual marriage. Based on this vivid image of “overwhelming, feminized fecundity,” Wolfe argues that “Clarissa's longing for close, erotic contact with a woman is a crucial and perdurable feature of her psyche” (Wolfe 41, 43). This reading largely ignores the fact that Clarissa's vibrant recollections of Sally are of a one-time occurrence, and thus the novelty of the experience has perhaps merely been preserved through disuse. Clarissa's musings on the incident include the image of having “been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it” (Woolf 35). It is entirely possible, then, that Clarissa's homosexual experiences are not fundamentally any more or less significant than her heterosexual ones, and only remain vivid because they were kept “wrapped up.” Had they been explored further, Clarissa's homosexuality could likely have become just as cold and monotonous as her heterosexuality. Wolfe also points to a notable androgyny running throughout the novel, perhaps nowhere more notably than in the Septimus-Clarissa duality. With a male double so closely echoing her own character, Clarissa “is a tangle of paradoxes, masculine and feminine at once” (Wolfe 40). However, once again, this interpretation overlooks the reality that the fundamental connection between Clarissa and Septimus is their shared psychological

anguish. Ultimately, androgyny in Mrs. Dalloway is merely the androgyny of human suffering.

Stripped of all flattering interpretations and Lacanian substitutions, we leave Clarissa “ forced to stand in her evening dress,” alone in an absurd world. Woolf leaves her pseudo-heroine at the bottom of the same mountain where Camus bids Sisyphus adieu at the end of his philosophical musings, doomed to once again roll the boulder back out to her guests. However, while Camus assures us we can imagine Sisyphus happy, Woolf remains tight-lipped on the nature of Clarissa’s future. It is entirely possible that in a few years, tired of her boulder, Clarissa Dalloway will fill her pockets with smaller rocks and walk into the River Ouse.

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