Art as indictment: social criticism in virginia woolf's mrs. dalloway

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In any story, conflict is vital. It drives forth plot and reveals truths about the characters involved, keeping readers engaged. It also reflects the world of its writer, who often uses conflict as a tool to illustrate personal ideas. This is particularly true in the case of early twentieth-century writer Virginia Woolf. Throughout her most famous novel, Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf draws readers into several different interpersonal conflicts, each of which involves a clash between English conventions and undeniable human conditions. Portraying these conflicts with keen sensitivity to injustice, folly, and ignorance, Woolf criticizes England’s traditional social system as a world in which people cannot acknowledge, confront, or understand what may disturb their comfort. Through the conflict between half-crazed World War I veteran Septimus Warren Smith and his prominent doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, Woolf highlights one of the English system’s most tragic failures: its tendency to isolate “ undesirables” at any cost to human dignity. Septimus finds himself desensitized after fighting in the Great War and utterly unable to return to daily life, where empathy is a vital quality rather than a hindrance. Incapable of recalling ordinary emotions, he hallucinates and experiences bouts of melancholia and exhilaration, punctuated by moments of lucidity. However, because English society wants nothing to do with abnormality, Septimus finds himself “ swallowed up” in London along with the “ many millions of young men called Smith” (Woolf 84). Indeed, ironically, it is in the thick of his insanity that he realizes that “ human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity…They desert the fallen” (89). In tracing Septimus’ visit to the renowned Sir William, Woolf indicates that even English doctors serve the sinister purpose of removing all disturbing agents from public life. Believing that the mentally unstable “ should drink milk in

bed," Sir William " not only prosper[s] himself but ma[kes] England prosper, seclud[ing] her lunatics…[and] ma[king] it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views" (99). He realizes that Septimus' is " a case of extreme gravity" (95), but instead of dealing with it directly, he recommends that Septimus " lie in a beautiful house in the country" (97), away from everyone who loves him. Lacking the faculties and resources to seek further help, Septimus and other " friendless" people who see Sir William have little choice but to obey his orders (102). Even more ominously, Woolf remarks that Sir William " endear[s] [himself] greatly to the relations of his victims" as he " shut[s] people up" (102). Here, her use of " victims" to describe Sir William's patients, and her revelation that he is well loved by their relatives, cast an insidious shadow upon doctors in England, who seek not to help the sick but to " take care…that these unsocial impulses…[are] held in control" (102). Unfortunately, the English system's way of sequestering away its pariahs claims more victims than those who receive treatment from Sir Williams; as Woolf evinces through the example of Lucrezia Smith, Septimus' young wife, those who care for the " friendless" find themselves trapped between obeying societal rules and keeping intact everything they have loved (102). At first, not understanding Septimus' illness, Lucrezia believes that her detached husband is acting " selfish" and despairs that " love makes one solitary" (23). When she finally realizes that something is desperately wrong with Septimus and obtains treatment for him, she finds herself more alone than ever, for Sir William tells her that treatment is " a question of rest…[a]way from her" (96). Realizing that she and Septimus have " been deserted" by those who purport to help (99), Lucrezia staunchly refuses to be separated from her husband, and readers follow her story with

sympathy as she fights, in a sense, to revive Septimus before he has even died. Later, when Septimus commits suicide in order to avoid yet another doctor’s visit, readers also see clearly the tragedy that arises when doctors work to eliminate the strange and disturbing rather than to heal the sick. Through Lucrezia’s conflicts, first with Septimus, then with English doctors like Sir William, Woolf conveys the enormous damage done by a system that tolerates neither abnormality nor connection with it. In portraying several unfulfilling romances, Woolf also criticizes marriages that perpetuate complacency rather than nurturing mutual growth. For example, although protagonist Clarissa Dalloway falls in love with the idealistic Peter Walsh, she feels uncomfortable with Peter’s insistence that everything in her life “ be shared; everything gone into” (8). Not content to let her develop simply into “ the perfect hostess” (7), Peter demands “ impossible things” of Clarissa, challenging her to think of life beyond throwing parties and entertaining guests (63). However, Clarissa eventually rejects Peter in favor of Richard Dalloway, a man who grants her “ a little licence, a little independence” (7). A “ thorough good sort” who displays “ inexplicable niceness” (74), Richard nonetheless “ make[s] a mere hostess” of Clarissa and “ encourage[s] her worldliness” so that in the end, she still “ care[s] too much for rank and society and getting on in the world” (76). Their marriage also falls short in passion and intimacy; Clarissa fails Richard sexually “ again and again,” unable to “ dispel a virginity…which cl[ings] to her” (31), and try as he might, Richard can never bring himself to tell Clarissa that he loves her. Ironically, the quixotic Peter also settles for a less fulfilling marriage and concludes simply that “ women…don’t know what passion is” (80). Both Clarissa and Peter are aware of having failed somehow; Clarissa asks herself

what she has made of her life, knowing that she has only stayed worldly, and the tortured Peter, still rather lovelorn, admits that he is “ in some sense a failure,” having done little with his humanitarian ideas aside from trekking to “ a peak in the Himalayas; reading science; reading philosophy” (50). Ultimately, because Clarissa and Peter marry people who do not challenge them or dare to make them uncomfortable from time to time, as they would have done for each other, neither of them counts life as a great success. Finally, Woolf uses the mutual resentment between Clarissa and Miss Doris Kilman to illustrate the stratified social arena of England, in which people of different classes are often too entrenched in their own prejudices to understand one another. Openly admitting that her dislike for the indigent Miss Kilman is unreasonable, Clarissa explains that “ no doubt with another throw of the dice…she would have loved Miss Kilman” (12). However, as it is, she resents Miss Kilman because she “ mak[es] you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she [is]; how rich you [are]; how she live[s] in a slum” (12); in other words, Miss Kilman makes her feel guilty about the materialism of her own life. On the other hand, unable to look down on Clarissa from a seat of wealth or beauty, Miss Kilman resents Clarissa as a “ condescending” woman “ from the most worthless of all classes – the rich, with a smattering of culture” (123). Scorning Clarissa as one who “ ha[s] known neither sorrow nor pleasure; who ha[s] trifled [her] life away,” she wishes “ to overcome her; to unmask her” (125). Each woman, feeling provoked by sheer difference in lifestyle, is too quick to leap to judgment to communicate and identify with the other. On the one hand, Clarissa “ care[s] much more for her roses than for the Armenians” (120), and on the other, Doris Kilman feels the overwhelming need to look down upon those whose fortunes she envies.

Woolf’s portrayal of the hostility between these two women gives readers a glimpse of how people of different classes in England frequently misjudge each other, simply because attempting to understand one another would require stepping out of their comfort zones. In one of his moments of lucidity, Septimus realizes that “[c]ommunication is health; communication is happiness” (93). Coincidentally, one of the recurring reasons for conflict in Mrs. Dalloway is people’s inability to communicate with one another. Quick to condemn and slow to listen, they feel immediate fear or anger at anything that disconcerts them and place themselves in positions that foster complacency rather than growth. Herein lies Woolf’s strongest criticism of not only English society, but also of society in general: that man is a creature of habit and of comfort zones, and that it is precisely those comfort zones that feed discontent. Work CitedWoolf, Virginia. Mrs. Dalloway. San Diego: Harcourt, 1953.