

Mrs. dalloway by  
virginia woolf: the  
superficiality of social  
conventions in soci...



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Virginia Woolf in “ Mrs. Dalloway” mocks the superficiality of social conventions in society, keeping its individual members in constant effort to pretend, mask their individuality and abandon their individual needs.

The text raises questions of how individuals are shaped by their social environments, how historical forces impinge on people’s lives, how class, wealth, and gender help to determine people’s fates. “ Mrs. Dalloway” was published during a time when British society was still recovering from World War One.

The difficult post-war times affected Woolf privately and subsequently affected her writing. “ Mrs. Dalloway” is her representative work that centers on the internal description of the characters while presenting social conditions of the postwar Britain.

The text takes place in the very volatile time period in Britain, portraying the idea that war is more than just a conflict on a battlefield. The war lead to the destruction of not only the physical infrastructure in Britain, but the social/political infrastructure that is vital in character relationships and analysis. Woolf showcases London populated by people of differing disabilities, socioeconomic statuses, and sexualities wherein each character occupies a unique position within the narrative’s classist, patriarchal, and heteronormative society.

Woolf eliminates any sense of an omniscient narrative voice by the constant ambiguity as to whether we are party to the narrator’s commentary or the thoughts of the central character. “ Mrs Dalloway” offers a critique of Empire and the war, taking the state as the embodiment of patriarchal power, who

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even Richard Dalloway refers to as “ our detestable social system”.

Dalloway’s words reverberate Virginia Woolf’s intention; ‘ 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 to show it at work, in its most intense. ’”

“ Mrs. Dalloway” offers a scathing indictment of the British class system. Woolf, through her novel and her characters such as Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith, Dr. William Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, shows how complex structures of power can seize the people’s real identity and fabricate it in order to be appropriate with the values and norms of power.

In “ Mrs Dalloway”, the British upper-class ignores the actuality of the aftermath of war and social events become a form of normalization for them to neutralize the existence of reality, giving them an illusion of fulfilment and connectedness. “ Mrs Dalloway” becomes an extended social critique where the audacity and stateliness of the most prominent guests is mocked through the description of the epicurean Hugh Whitbread, the sophisticated Lady Burton.

Clarissa by inviting high members of English society who are the symbols of power, provides an appropriate background for madness to reveal itself, where the upper-class cannot help but find relief and peace in the deaths of working class people who have become free of all societal pressures resulting in Septimus’ suicide becoming a casual conversation at their party. Woolf mocks the inability of upper class English society to recognize the changing social and political landscape. Lady Bruton, a once powerful upper

class individual faces challenges due to her old ways of aristocratic networking, representing the degeneration of old english society. Richard's committees, Lady Bruton's emigration project, Hugh Whitbread's letters to the Times, are all the exhibition of the authority of ruling-class.

Hugh, an advocator of ruling class, functions as a symbol of all those who have inherited their social standing and who are protective of their privileged social standing. Woolf gives us Kilman as a symbol for all the despicable things people sometimes claim to do in the name of religion. Society includes a body of individuals who are in common geographical region and under the same political and cultural authority. Individuals have to conform to the norms defined by the society and violating these unwritten rules, is seen as abnormal. In Mrs Dalloway, Holmes and Bradshaw try to suppress this abnormality. Bradshaw views himself as one who helps his country by making his patients conform to his idea of sanity and secluding them from society. The characters of the doctors, Hugh Whitbread, and Lady Bruton as compared to the tragically mishandled plight of Septimus, allows Woolf to depict how exposed and ill-treated those suffering from mental illness really are by the doctors.

Septimus Smith is portrayed as a war veteran suffering from shell-shock, who finds frustration in his doctor's prognosis and decides to commit suicide. Septimus believed that his lack of emotion was a sign of strength and courage. Woolf, through portraying Septimus' life, indicates the prevalent insanity in London and the disillusionment in English people. His suicide becomes an act of resistance to the power of London's social system.

Septimus, through his madness, his death and life, unveils the truths hidden <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloway-by-virginia-woolf-the-superficiality-of-social-conventions-in-society/>

under the surface of society. Woolf utilizes madness to criticize the structures of English society with a sharp attack to the social system at “ its most intense. ” Placing the doctor and patient together, Woolf emphasizes the fatal impact of society’s social structures upon people.

The world of the sane and the insane side by side: Woolf portrays the sane grasping for significant and substantial connections to life. Woolf in “ Mrs Dalloway” showcases the breakdown of stable social categories and how the escalation of social roles to be performed results in an anxiety about the ability of the characters to “ sanely” exist within a hostile social system, performing roles that do not adequately correspond to their identity. Woolf shares a ruthless observation of the social system, through Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, who have both been have been psychologically damaged by their position in society. These two psychologically distinct and disparate characters, both try to establish a stable identity while struggling with patriarchal arrangement of the society and misunderstanding of mental illness. Clarissa’s fertility is the sole dynamic providing her with a function in this patriarchal society, leading her to face a psychological crisis as to her future role. Septimus suffers a similar crisis of identity as a victim of the society; fighting a war sparked by bureaucratic tensions out of his control.

Unable to reconcile his feelings for the England he left to fight for and the England to which he returns leads to rapid changes in his status and identity eventually claiming his sanity. Both Clarissa and Septimus suffer from the oppression of society; Septimus however alleviates his internal struggle in death while Clarissa is unable to find an exit for herself due to the ideology of class propriety to which she must conform.

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Woolf portrays the conventional society of the beginning of the 20th century, where women's lives were shaped by the patriarchal society, sexual repression and ideologies of gender. The society brings to light masculine normativity, which rules what is more convenient to their genre, where majority of men belong to the public sphere, possessing an active role within their society and most of women belong to the private sphere, taking care of the household or some domestic issues. "Mrs Dalloway" portrays a picture of a patriarchal and imperialistic society, where women suffer alone, have no individual identity, and are compelled to suppress their needs.

Woolf employs Clarissa as a vehicle for critiquing patriarchy and all it entails including class-based social hierarchies, gender bias, and heteronormativity. Clarissa's decision to marry, in general, is because she is part of a society that enforces heterosexuality upon an individual. Clarissa's love for Sally Saton, contradicts all norms of patriarchy and they ignore their desires because the only accepted female identity was the one that was accepted by patriarchy. Clarissa, in rejecting the potentially fulfilling relationship with Sally and marrying Richard, not only conforms to the expected ideologies of her society, but represses her homosexual desires for women. Because of her 'place' in society, Clarissa explores her sexuality and love for Sally only in her memories, while her marriage to Richard Dalloway represents superficiality and conventionality of the upper-class in the early twentieth century Britain. Septimus' class and his mental instability differentiates him from Clarissa; however, they both struggle with the same oppressive structure-patriarchy that defines and categorizes men as much as they do women. Septimus idealizes war for it offered him the apparently

straightforward and masculine role of defending idealized womanhood. His society's expectations of masculinity destroy his ability to express his emotions. He sees phantoms, has visions, and is unable to convey his reality.

Peter Walsh exemplifies the oppressive effects of male privilege and heteronormative systems, by using Daisy Simmons to fulfil his preconceived idea of marriage. Woolf emphasizes the misconception of marriage as a social chain, criticizing how marriage imposed boundaries on people that psychologically oppressed them, leading them to even commit suicide. Clarissa, conforms to the ideals present in her society; Septimus, too, marries; but shell-shock prevents him from reintegrating into London's social spaces. Septimus's suicide highlights the fact that there is no way out of the patriarchal structure; there are only ways of coping with it.

The terrible effects of patriarchy is portrayed also through Lucrezia's life who becomes a victim to the cruelty of the social and political doctrine of the English society. She silently struggles through Septimus's insanity, enduring even the indifference of Septimus, for whom she left her relatives and country. "Mrs. Dalloway" acts a critique on female subjugation in the domestic sphere of hostessship where Woolf presents characters that are lost in their own being, they have to put up to the obstacles of the system that gives them an apparently viable reality. Woolf rejects the literary and linguistic conventions of novel-writing to dismantle the ordered nature of early 20th century society. Through this aversion to established literary practices, Woolf subtly proposes the need to alter the traditional rituals and structures of society, if its inherent problems are to be rectified. However,

Woolf is never overtly or brazenly radical in her condemnation, refusing to <https://assignbuster.com/mrs-dalloway-by-virginia-woolf-the-superficiality-of-social-conventions-in-society/>

adhere to one particular viewpoint. Many critics argue that the novels depicted by the technique of stream-of-consciousness cannot reflect the serious social problems and that “ Mrs. Dalloway” is an apolitical and asocial novel about individual internal life as opposed to social life. Critics who do believe that the novel is concerned with social and political events and developments of the time, consider it a novel of suggestion, not argumentation.

Woolf’s social critique and political radicalism are more subtly formed and is expressed in the language of observation rather than in direct commentary since she believes it is the reader’s work to put the observations together and understand the coherent point of view behind them. As Julia Briggs indicates in *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*, Woolf invites readers to explore the literary tensions within her novels: “ Woolf intended her [experiments in writing] to bring the reader closer to everyday life, in all its confusion, mystery and uncertainty, rejecting the artificial structures and categories of Victorian fiction”.