

Reading the First World War through Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

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Abstract: *The literature produced in every age becomes emblematic of its socio - cultural milieu. The literature produced in the twentieth century becomes more significant in this respect for the impactful bearing that the two World Wars have had on it. Addressing the first World War in particular, one can discern its influence on the works of Virginia Woolf vividly, that this paper aims to address. Jacob Flanders in 'Jacob's Room', Septimus Warren Smith in 'Mrs Dalloway', and Andrew Ramsay in 'To the Lighthouse' portray the telling influence of the first World War in the literary world of the time. This paper aims to explore the impact of the War in Virginia Woolf's 'Mrs Dalloway' in particular. The intertwined lives of Mrs Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith whose shell - shock ultimately becomes suicidal project the War afflicted England of those times and Woolf captures the essence in her stream of consciousness. The methodology of qualitative analyses through close textual reading of the text has been employed for the purpose of the paper.*

Keywords: stream - of - consciousness, shell - shock, war - afflicted England, World War I

Marking a break from the Victorian novels of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf treads on a new path, that of writing a stream of consciousness, one of its kind spanning over only one day in June 1923, and that of focusing on the ordinary rather than the grandeur, in her *Mrs. Dalloway*. Much of the of this change in the method of writing and its subject, can be attributed to the aftermaths of the first World War that brought significant changes in the society of England of those times. World War I was one of the primary catalysts for the development of the modernist literary movement. Owing to the horror of the war, the post - war authors and artists had to find new ways to describe the human condition. This is the condition that informs Virginia Woolf's writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* and the shadow of the war can be discerned throughout the novel.

Five years have passed after the War ended but it continued to affect those who lived through it. This paper explores the aftermath of the Great War. The setting of the novel is June 1923 but the First World War still looms large in *Mrs Dalloway's* hot London air, and haunts Septimus Warren Smith, underlining that the trauma of the war was unending, and its devastation still raw and lasting for the people directly or indirectly affected by the War, no matter how hard everyone tried to brush the matter under the carpet. The countless anxieties and devastating anguish of the war were carved into every aspect of post - war life. The aeroplane flying over London depicting the novel technique of sky - writing of the times creates a restlessness in the people.

Woolf employs the fragmented way of writing, quite akin to the broken post - war society. She makes use of cinematic techniques like montage, close - ups, flashbacks, tracking shots and rapid cuts, in the writing of her novel. As the Cubists broke the visual plane, Woolf cuts the narrative plane. According to Elaine Showalter, "In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the cinema is one of the post - war developments that has altered the relation between the classes, and acted as a leveller" (21). The characters in the novel clearly represent the different perspectives of British society following World War I. At the centre of the story, Clarissa Dalloway embodies the feeling of the upper class, like the love of

beauty and familial attachment, but is also indifference to others' pain and trauma.

Clarissa is the epitome of repression and denial. She beautifies her world to hide the ugliness of death and pain underneath. At the opposite side of the spectrum, Septimus Smith is the personification of the collapse of the imperialistic pride and power of England after the war, exuding the pain and suffering that he is unable to hide. Peter Walsh serves as a foil to Clarissa's aristocratic viewpoint, although he maintains a naïve attachment to pre - war England. Another more deliberate resistance to Clarissa's ideals comes in the form of Miss Kilman, who represents the working class in opposition to the war, and Doctors Holmes and Bradshaw act as the representatives of continuity, staunch supporters of the pre - war Empire. Despite the efforts of these characters to maintain the appearance of continuity and certainty, the manifestation of the trauma of the war keeps reoccurring making them paranoid. Through these characters, Woolf reveals the way in which British society has lost its pre - war identity and the war still lingers in the people of London.

Britain's desire for continuity coupled with an uncertainty about its reality appear early in the novel as the motorcar passes down the Piccadilly. The people on the street witness the car driving past slowly with a reserve, trying to figure out who could be inside it. Clarissa, along with the others, believes it is the Queen, Prime Minister, or some member of the royalty. Septimus is the only one who looks upon the car with dread and apprehension, "as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames" (Woolf 15). The people who gathered around the mysterious car stand in an "awe of the British Empire and the idea of its former reality" (Woolf 16). Only Septimus, upon seeing the car, expresses great fear and anguish. The British Empire before the war was an enduring symbol of power and greatness, but after the war, the symbol of the country's superiority is hidden behind tinted glasses.

At the heart of the novel and the embodiment of stoic British reserve is Clarissa Dalloway. Keeping in line with the

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unspoken societal rule of the English, Clarissa is determined to deny or evade anything that would disturb her. She chooses to repress the trauma by cloaking the images of death and devastation with beauty. Her attempt to organize post - traumatic chaos is much like Great Britain's repression of the devastation caused by World War I. Her response to trauma is to create beauty around her through her artistic expressions, such as gathering flowers for her lavish party. Although she proves that it is still possible to find beauty in everyday life, yet it is too transient to instigate real change much like the superficial monuments and tributes that serve as substitutes for the realities of war and death.

Woolf uses Clarissa Dalloway to express what is considered by society as an acceptable defence mechanism. Clarissa's indifference to the devastation created by the war stems from the fact that she has no connection to anyone who died in battle. Clarissa's only experience is through second - hand accounts of those affected by the war, and other than a passing sentiment, she appears to hardly acknowledge the effect of death on the survivors. This idea of repression and denial in reaction to the trauma of war is an emotional response seemingly advocated by the aristocracy.

In complete opposition to the socialite's emotional repression, Woolf introduces a damaged war veteran who fails to contain his emotional distress. Septimus Smith displays his inner turmoil, even though he knows that society expects him to repress those emotions. Septimus returns from the war a broken man suffering from shell - shock and post - traumatic stress disorder, and although his wife and doctors try to integrate him back into civilian life by forcing him to conform to the ideals and expectations of society, yet he firmly believes he is not a part of that society any more. Septimus exhibits the symptoms of shell - shock which contradict the social expectations of the notions of masculinity in the society. He is a tragic symbol of what many men became just after the war, suffering from what was labelled as male hysteria, an illness of emotional distress usually attributed to women in the Victorian era. World War I and the trauma inflicted upon the soldiers led to a mass mental breakdown among the male population and created a crisis of masculinity. Disillusioned after the war, Septimus knows that he is a changed man and cannot revert to his pre - war identity. He cannot conform to the beliefs and tenets of British society's idea of masculinity (Bethea).

Near the end of her party, Dr. Bradshaw arrives and announces that Septimus has committed suicide. Clarissa's initial reaction is not an emotional display of empathy or concern, but an exclamation of inconvenience. "Oh! Thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought" (Woolf 183). She blames the Bradshaws for having the gall to talk of Septimus' suicide at her party, as if they were not allowed to mention death in the place Clarissa had created to avoid it. Clarissa leaves the room to process this information, the unwelcome intrusion of death into her party. As she thinks of Septimus' suicide, she determines that "death was [his] attempt to communicate," in an effort to deny the finality of his act (Woolf 184).

Woolf through her characterization represents a society that

collectively suffers, despite the individual's best efforts to uphold a perfectly upright and stoic countenance. Showalter suggests, "As her own generation of writers struggled with a new way of capturing character, Woolf warned, readers would have to get used to a season of fragments or failures" (17). Clarissa denies and represses her pain, choosing instead to create beauty to mask her suffering. Septimus chooses suicide to escape the pressure of being forced to conform to the English standard of masculinity and strength as instilled by his doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw, who are the upholders of the pre - War ethos of the Great Britain. Despite Clarissa's best attempt to remain immune to the devastation and evade death, it appears at her party. Woolf's depiction of the aftermath of World War I reflects a society struggling to regain its pre - war vitality, but which cannot escape the trauma of death and destruction in their everyday lives. The effects of the War are all pervasive in both her style and subject of writing, so much so, that War itself becomes a character in the novel with its omnipresence.

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