

Shattered Selves: Silent Turmoil and Trauma in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) offers a profound exploration of women's consciousness and social roles within the patriarchal framework of early twentieth-century England. Through the fragmented narrative structure and stream-of-consciousness technique, Woolf exposes the inner conflicts of her protagonist named Clarissa Dalloway who grapples with societal expectations and her own suppressed desires. The novel's portrayal of domesticity, marriage, and mental health becomes a subtle critique of gender norms that restrict female individuality and self-expression. By applying feminist literary criticism, this paper examines how Woolf dismantles the illusion of stability in upper-class domestic life and articulates the silent resistance of women seeking meaning beyond social conventions. The essay also considers Woolf's modernist style as a political act of reclaiming female subjectivity and redefining womanhood in literature.

Keywords: *Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, feminist criticism, patriarchy gender roles, modernism, female identity, stream of consciousness*

Human civilization has been shaped by revolutions, reform movements, and wars that have altered not only political maps but also the human psyche. Among these historical moments, the nineteenth century stands out in English literature as an age of remarkable progress and industrial expansion. Marked by technological breakthroughs like the railway, the steam engine, and the telegraph, this era witnessed rapid urbanization and material growth. The Victorian Age, characterized by Queen Victoria's long reign, brought prosperity and innovation; yet beneath this façade of progress lurked moral rigidity, spiritual crisis, and the social consequences of industrial capitalism.

While scientific discoveries and medical advances transformed people's lifestyles, the unchecked greed for material wealth led to moral degeneration. Imperialism, an inevitable by-product of industrial expansion, further complicated human relations, resulting in global conflicts and ultimately paving the way for two catastrophic world wars. The First and Second World Wars shattered the illusion of progress and left humanity disillusioned and traumatized. The devastation, both physical and psychological, caused an existential crisis that redefined modern consciousness.

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The early twentieth century, therefore, witnessed not only political instability but also a profound shift in human thought and creativity. Writers, poets, and philosophers responded to this sense of loss through literary experimentation. Movements such as Modernism, Existentialism, and Absurdism emerged as intellectual responses to the chaos of war and the disintegration of faith in traditional values. Literature became a medium to express the fragmented human experience and to probe the depths of the unconscious mind.

In this context, Virginia Woolf, one of the central figures of Modernist literature, offers a nuanced exploration of the psychological aftermath of war. Her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) captures the disoriented post-war world and exposes the silent wounds inflicted on the human mind. The novel not only depicts the social and emotional paralysis of the interwar period but also reveals the gendered dimensions of trauma and alienation in modern urban life.

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MODERNIST VISION:

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a pioneering British novelist and essayist, revolutionized the art of fiction through her use of stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and psychological realism. Her works, including *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *The Waves* (1931), break away from linear narration and external realism, instead delving into the intricate layers of human thought. As a member of the Bloomsbury Group, Woolf was deeply engaged with contemporary issues of psychology, gender, and artistic freedom.

Mrs. Dalloway exemplifies Woolf's mastery in depicting the inner workings of the human mind. The narrative unfolds over a single day in post-World War-I London, moving around Clarissa Dalloway's preparations for a party. Beneath this seemingly ordinary plot lies a profound commentary on time, memory, and identity. The war haunts the consciousness of every character, particularly that of Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked veteran whose psychological deterioration mirrors the disillusionment of an entire generation.

Through her intricate narrative technique, Woolf dismantles the boundaries between past and present, sanity and madness, individual and society. The novel becomes not merely a portrayal of post-war London but a psychological map of modern existence, reflecting the fragmented and unstable reality of the twentieth century.

WAR, TRAUMA, AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE PSYCHE:

The traumatic impact of war forms the psychological and emotional core of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although the guns have fallen silent, the psychic echoes of violence continue to reverberate through the lives of survivors. The concept of trauma, derived from the Greek word for "wound", was originally used to describe physical injury, but it later came to signify psychological affliction. As Cathy Caruth explains, trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11).

The First World War introduced an unprecedented form of psychological injury that came to be known as shell shock. Charles Samuel Myers, the British psychologist who coined the term, described it as both a physical and psychological reaction to the intense stress of combat (Kucerova 27). Soldiers who survived trench warfare frequently experienced trembling, nightmares, emotional numbness, and disconnection from reality. Over time, this condition evolved into what modern psychiatry identifies as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that is a disorder in which individuals relive traumatic experiences through flashbacks, intrusive

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thoughts, and dissociation. In Woolf's narrative, Septimus Warren Smith epitomizes the shell-shocked veteran. Once an idealistic poet and patriot, Septimus volunteers for war but returns as a broken man. His fragmented thoughts, hallucinations, and alienation from society reflect the internal scars of trauma. He oscillates between hallucination and lucidity, haunted by the ghost of his fallen comrade, Evans. His wife named Lucrezia becomes a silent witness to his gradual mental collapse that could be perceived as a reflection of the helplessness of those who loved the war's survivors but could not comprehend their torment.

As Kucerova observes, "the repressed feelings start coming to the surface even more intensely, suddenly, and unexpectedly" (27). Septimus's mental breakdown represents not individual weakness but the collective psychological damage inflicted by modern warfare. His inability to articulate his pain highlights the failure of language and medicine to heal trauma. Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, the representatives of institutional authority, trivialize his suffering by prescribing "rest" and "normality," revealing the insensitivity of a system that pathologizes emotional distress rather than understanding it.

Ultimately, Septimus's suicide is both a cry of despair and an act of resistance. In choosing death, he escapes a world that demands conformity and silences individuality. Clarissa Dalloway's reaction to his death, her momentary identification with him, suggests a deeper metaphysical connection between life and death, sanity and madness. Woolf thus transforms a personal tragedy into a universal meditation on existence and the human condition.

CLARISSA DALLOWAY AND THE PARALLEL OF EMOTIONAL DISPLACEMENT:

While Septimus embodies the direct victim of war, Clarissa Dalloway represents the subtler emotional alienation of the upper class in post-war England. Beneath her graceful demeanour and social charm lies a deep sense of existential emptiness. Her memories of youthful passion with Sally Seton and unresolved feelings for Peter Walsh reflect her longing for authenticity in a society bound by convention.

Clarissa's inner fragmentation parallels Septimus's psychological disintegration. Both characters are haunted by the past and struggle to reconcile it with the present. Through this parallel, Woolf reveals how trauma extends beyond the battlefield into the domestic and emotional lives of civilians. As Sushma notes, "though the war had come to an end, Septimus was still there psychologically on the battlefield," and by extension, Clarissa too is "spiritually wounded by the emptiness of post-war life" (133).

Woolf's use of the stream of consciousness allows the reader to move fluidly between Clarissa's social world and Septimus's inner chaos, exposing the shared vulnerability of human experience. Both seek meaning in an indifferent world; both confront mortality. Their fates intersect symbolically when Clarissa learns of Septimus's suicide during her party. This moment of recognition transcends class and circumstance, suggesting that all human beings share a fragile consciousness threatened by the pressures of modern civilization.

WOOLF'S PSYCHOLOGICAL MODERNISM:

Woolf's literary innovation lies not only in her themes but in her technique. By abandoning conventional plot structure and external narration, she mirrors the fragmented consciousness of modern life. The shifting perspectives and interior monologues in *Mrs. Dalloway* enact the disjointedness of time and memory characteristic of trauma.

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Her writing anticipates psychoanalytic insights into repression, memory, and the unconscious. The novel can be read through Freudian and post-Freudian frameworks where suppressed experiences resurface as obsessive thoughts and hallucinations. The recurring motifs of time, death, and the sea symbolize the fluidity of human consciousness and the inevitability of mortality.

Moreover, Woolf subtly integrates a feminist dimension into this psychological landscape. Clarissa's limited social role, her unspoken desires, and her struggle for self-definition reflect the constraints imposed on women in patriarchal society. Thus, the novel functions simultaneously as a critique of post-war trauma and a meditation on gendered forms of repression.

CONCLUSION:

Mrs. Dalloway stands as a timeless testimony to the psychological devastation of war and the fragility of the human spirit. Through the parallel narratives of Clarissa and Septimus, Virginia Woolf reveals the interconnectedness of public and private suffering, sanity and madness, life and death. The novel transcends historical specificity to offer a universal exploration of trauma, identity, and the search for meaning. In reimagining the inner life of her characters, Woolf transforms the experience of trauma into art, compelling readers to confront the invisible wounds of modern existence. Her work remains profoundly relevant in today's world where violence, alienation, and psychological distress continue to shape human consciousness. *Mrs. Dalloway* thus becomes not only a reflection of its age but also a timeless plea for empathy, introspection, and peace.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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