



# Narratives of illness and Healing: Medical Humanities Perspectives in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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## Abstract

*This paper examines, via the example of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, the medical humanities approach. In addition to the novel's criticisms, the history of medical approaches to trauma, illness, and their treatments is elucidated. However, it is the stream of consciousness approach via the example of Mrs. Dalloway that clearly indicates the subjective experience of mental illness, especially with regard to the example of Septimus Warren Smith that is presented. So, shell shock is given as a first explanation, but rather, as recognized today, a condition attendant to 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder'. However, it is the inadequacies of modern psychiatry as presented by Sir Will Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes that clearly present a criticism of medical approaches to mental health, as opposed to social adaptability. At the same time, Woolf explores the conditions of social, as opposed to simply emotional, vulnerability as presented via the example of Clarissa Dalloway, as opposed to simply emotional, to suggest that health is gender-specific. However, with the sufferance of skin disease, he could no longer take any part in public affairs. Therefore, presenting London itself as an interdependent Organism, Woolf's narrative lucidly depicts how the individual health is inseparable from broader social, political, and cultural environments. Finally, 'Mrs. Dalloway' stands out as an outstanding representative of a literary narrative, which is allowed to press those aspects of illness and healing that clinical discourse cannot fully capture and makes it a foundational text for the Medical humanities.*

**Keywords: embodiment, sickliness, patient narrative, psychological trauma, mental health, stigma, stream-of-consciousness**

## Introduction

Medical humanity is a transdisciplinary approach that aims to close the distance between medicine and humanity by synthesizing approaches to health, illness, literature, history, philosophy of ethics, as well as arts. At the heart of medical humanity is its recognition that narrative—the way a person tells the story, how a society narrativizes suffering, how medical power translates symptoms—is shaping the meaning of health.

Mrs. Dalloway(1925), by the renowned writer Virginia Woolf, is a crucial text in this genre. Woolf herself suffered from mental illnesses and the

psychiatric institution. The novel is a scathing commentary on the practices and the social setting of the early twentieth-century Medical Systems.

By the interaction of the story of Clarissa Dalloway, and Septimus Warren Smith, Woolf generates an elaborate literary environment where trauma, mental illness, social forces, and memory interact with the lively environment of the energetic city of London. It progressively breaks the boundaries of strict notions of mental illness, letting the reader step inside the minds of the characters, which do not correspond to objective notions.



This paper examines how 'Mrs. Dalloway' illustrates the ideals of medical humanities: narrative, medical illness as limited, and the role of society in illness. It will be a critical appreciative essay about how Woolf was a revolutionary writer, as well as a precursor to medical humanities by providing a more comforting, less scientific way of coping with mental illness.

### **Narrative Form and the Subjective Experience of Illness**

One of the key contributions of \*Mrs. Dalloway\* in regards to medical humanities relates to its literary technique. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narrative technique enables the interior world of her protagonists' mind to stream out in real time, thereby embedding the reader within their mental processes and experiences. Septimus Warren Smith's mind takes on a pivotal role in its own right in rendering in \*Mrs. Dalloway\* the experience of trauma.

Septimus is suffering from what is known as "Shell shock," or what is referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) today. These symptoms of PTSD occur through the auditory hallucinations, emotional numbing, hypervigilance, as well as intrusive memories he experiences as symptoms. However, Woolf approached the subject of Septimus with diagnostic objectivity rather than the benefits of the phenomenology of trauma. His subjective experiences include the breakage of time itself as well as the enhancement of all of his senses as they revolve around the traumatic memory.

Narrative medicine calls attention to how often clinical practice fails to grasp the complexity of pain unless medical professionals learn how to listen to the story being told by the patient. But the narrative form that Woolf adopts prefigures all such ideas. Septimus's suffering is a case of pathology that is to be corrected, but it is also a proof of the emotional and ethical impotence of society that is not ready to accept the full story of human suffering that is being told through her methodological innovations.

### **Critique of Medical Authority and Psychiatric Paternalism**

Woolf's portrayal of the medical profession is one of the strongest subversions of the discourse of health. The doctors that take care of Septimus are Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, and they represent a paternalism that has traditionally characterized psychiatric treatment. Dr. Holmes reduces Septimus' problem to no more than 'nerves' when he says: "it is nothing but nerves—and he does need a change." This corresponds to a very typical gesture of the medical profession. He takes pain to alleviate the patient's suffering while ignoring what actually ails him.

Medical humanities urge an examination of just such power relationships. Medical humanities state the relevance of health care's grounding in empathy, story, ethical listening, rather than control. Woolf's representation of Bradshaw reveals the ways in which the authority of the psychiatrist is the application of social control. His professional composure conceals a complete uninterest in the suffering of humanity, making him forever unintelligible to the suffering of Septimus. It's not the delusions of Septimus which cause him to end his life. It's the suffocating logic of the world of the psychiatrist which gives the patient no room to express or endure his pain.

Woolf's critique is very prophetic concerning the issue of depersonalization in modern medicine. \*The Novel\* is a challenge for its readers because it makes them think about a rather frequent phenomenon wherein medicine silences a patient.

### **Taruma, Memory, and the Body as a Site of History**

Taruma is not something that is enclosed within the private world of Septimus. It pervades the whole environment. Taruma is the experiences of the sufferers which cannot be separated from culture and history. Taruma is a memory of the first world war which is a collective scare experienced by a whole generation. Taruma is also the trepidation felt by Septimus when he experiences hallucinations. This



denotes how the body experiences the history of violence.

Woolf's portrayal of trauma reflects themes of embodiment in medical humanities. Septimus experienced symptoms of psychological trouble but also of the body reacting in certain ways – shudders, racing pulses, tensions – illustrating how mental illness is experienced in bodily terms. The body is thus rendered not only as a repository of history but also as its stage and its analyst. The mind-body fusion in Septimus's trauma thus overcomes the dualisms of Western medicine and its lingering imprint in modern medicine.

This is further developed through Septimus's breakdown, in which Woolf invites the readers to question cultural reluctance to confront suffering. His inability to reintegrate into civilian life exposes society's denial of wartime trauma. Woolf does not isolate the veteran's experience; instead, she embeds it within a broader network of social anxiety. The building sounds of London—the chiming of Big Ben, the backfiring of cars—echo the rhythms of wartime memory. Trauma becomes ambient, dispersed, and omnipresent.

The genius of Woolf's innovation is that she can connect personal illness and prove that human experience cannot be divided categorically into individual or societal headings. For medical humanities, this is a key insight: health and illness are always culturally mediated, historically situated, and socially performed.

### **Women's Social Pressure and the Emotional Politics of Health**

In regard to medical humanities studies generally, Clarissa's story is one way to examine how societal norms impact mental health. As a hostess, Clarissa represents not only social leadership but also the kind of emotional labor that takes place. Clarissa is forced to maintain harmony and mitigate conflict as well as perform happiness independent of her mental state. This kind of mental repression is indicative of how women's mental health has long been circumscribed by their ability to offer social cohesion.

Woolf's subtle examination of the medical and social institution that disregards such occurrences is reflected in the literal cardiac problem of Clarissa herself. Correlations blur the line of demarcation between the integrity of the body or the soul. Woolf's message to the world via the fictional representation of Septimus and Clarissa is the limitation of the female experience being no less confining or damaging as the institutional power of the "other" half in the form of the Forces of Society embodied in the person

### **Conclusion**

Mrs. Dalloway, a novel by Virginia Woolf, makes a highly significant contribution to medical humanities. Septimus' fractured consciousness. Septimus' fractured consciousness is one of the first very significant treatments of trauma to have appeared in literature, pointing to the inadequacies of medical knowledge to adequately assess the depth of mental suffering that patients experience. Septimus' case history points to the paternalism of psychiatry, indicating ways in which medical systems can actually promote conformity rather than cure. While so, the interior lives of Clarissa Dalloway portray the emotionally charged politics of gender, memory, and social roles, so as to demonstrate in health not only the medical, but also the social and existential aspects of human existence. Woolf's London, so full of sensual, emotional, and experiential nuances, brings to the reader's notice the fact that health and wellness exist in the company of other people. Her writing continues to serve as a call to always regard medicine, rather than merely the science of the body, as the art of human understanding.

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