

The Burden of Being: Grappling with Existence and Identity in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway transcends the social chronicle to delve into the existential anxieties of its characters. This paper attempts to explore the intricacies with which the novel embodies the central themes of existentialism, death, and memory. This study examines Clarissa Dalloway's internal struggles between societal expectations and her yearning for an authentic life; a choice mirrored by Septimus' inability to cope with the overwhelming burden of choosing how to live in a world devoid of its inherent meaning(s). Through their contrasting approaches to life and death, the character of Septimus and Mrs. Dalloway grapple with creating meaning in an indifferent universe. This paper further investigates how their environment contributes to the characters' fractured sense of self and what zeitgeist could have inspired Woolf to come up with the concept of the "stream of consciousness" as a form of writing in the novel. Additionally, the paper analyses the text as a subtle exploration of queerness and how that might have further contributed to their struggle with their respective identities, further leading to a struggle between societal expectations and the characters' latent desires.

Keywords: *stream-of-consciousness, existentialism, cubism, thwarted belongingness, sexuality, queerness*

Introduction

"Mrs. Dalloway is always giving parties to cover the silence."

-Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway

Mrs. Dalloway, published in 1925 by Virginia Woolf, is a novel that dives into the life of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class woman in London and Septimus Smith, a war veteran. The story unfolds over a single day in June 1923, just five years after the end of World War I. The entire novel takes place in one day. This tight focus allows Woolf to delve deeply into the characters' thoughts and memories. *Mrs. Dalloway* uses a unique narrative style called the stream-of-consciousness. While the story unfolds through a close-up third-person perspective, it jumps between episodes in the characters' lives. This essay aims to look into the existentialism in the novel and various factors that contribute to it.

While the main story unfolds in London, flashbacks transport us to Clarissa's childhood home in the

countryside, offering a contrast between her past and present. The setting becomes more than just a backdrop; it shapes the characters and their inner struggles. Clarissa's preparations for a party become a metaphor for her attempt to create order and meaning in a world forever changed by war.

Materials and Methods

Virginia Woolf was an English novelist and essayist regarded as one of the foremost modernist literary figures of the twentieth century. During the interwar period, Woolf was a significant figure in London literary society and a member of the Bloomsbury Group. Her most famous works include the novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Orlando* (1928), and the book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). *Mrs. Dalloway* was written around the period when the World War 1 was fought. The war had a devastating impact on Britain. Millions of lives were lost, and the country grappled with a

profound sense of disillusionment. The previous sense of order and stability felt shattered. The war exacerbated existing social inequalities. The working class, who bore the brunt of the war effort, saw little improvement in their lives.

The characters in the novel grapple with a world forever changed by the war. There's a sense of underlying unease and a search for meaning in a world that seems uncertain. People trying to maintain a sense of order and tradition despite the changing times. However, the cracks in their world begin to show. Septimus Smith, a war veteran suffering from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), embodies the psychological and social costs of the war. He represents the lost generation, forever marked by the trauma of war.

The war led to unemployment, inflation, and a general sense of uncertainty. The economic hardship wasn't evenly distributed. The upper-middle class, which Clarissa Dalloway belongs to, may have faced some reduction in wealth and social mobility, but they generally maintained their comfortable lifestyles. The working class, however, bore the brunt of unemployment and rising costs.

The British government implemented austerity measures to reduce the national debt. This meant cuts in spending on social programs and public services. Some members of the upper class, like Clarissa, might have used social gatherings and maintaining appearances as a way to distract themselves from the harsh realities of the post-war world. The rich had means to use superficiality as a coping mechanism. This luxury wasn't available to the working class who had no choice but to face the harsh reality of their lives. Lives that involved death and devastation. Deaths of innocent lives masked as martyrdom. To the ones who put thought into the situation, only one question perplexed them? Is this life bringing them glory or is it just one big spectacle of gore that leaves them drained through and through?

Despite the difficulties, there were also signs of change. New industries were emerging, and the women's suffrage movement had recently achieved success. This implies that a large flux of information was happening around. This suggests a sense of hope for a different future. It was a period when all the events that had unfolded during the war led to people questioning their

existence and their purpose. Sally Seton, the free-spirited and penniless friend of Clarissa, brings up the subject of suffrage in the novel, a movement signifying how women came to the conclusion that they were in fact more than their Adam's rib. They were humans themselves with the ability to think and act and be something beyond an extension of a man's imagination.

Existentialism is the philosophical belief that we are each responsible for creating purpose or meaning in our own lives. Our individual purpose and meaning are not given to us by Gods, governments, teachers or other authorities. Existentialism is a school of thought that grapples with the big questions about human existence. Existentialists believe we are fundamentally free. There's no predetermined script for our lives, and we constantly make choices that shape who we are. Since there's no inherent meaning to life, we must create our own. This involves taking responsibility for our choices and the path we forge. Living authentically means acting on your own values, not following someone else's definition of who you should be.

Findings and Results

Mrs. Dalloway was written around a time when an art movement like Cubism had found its way into art and reasonably so. Cubism, a revolutionary art movement that emerged around 1907 in Paris, France, is known for its radical departure from traditional representation. It rejected the idea of a single viewpoint. Instead, they depicted objects and figures from multiple perspectives simultaneously. This creates a fragmented and multifaceted image, challenging the way we perceive the world. The geometric forms emphasize the structure and underlying form of the subject rather than its realistic appearance. Objects are fragmented into their component parts and then reassembled on the canvas in a new way. This allows for a more complex and dynamic representation of the subject. The stream of consciousness resembles this technique, albeit in writing- a 'literary cubism'. It incorporates sensory impressions, incomplete ideas, unusual syntax, and rough grammar. All the perplexities and trials and tribulations that a thinking, feeling human mind has to face.

Septimus' character in the novel is probably the quintessential personification of the theory of 'thwarted belongingness'. According to the infamous social psychologists Baumeister and Leary, 'thwarted belongingness' is a psychologically-painful mental state that results when the fundamental need for connectedness as the "need to belong" —is unmet. Several characters in the novel can be seen struggling with their sense of self. A lot of our sense of self is constructed around how the world perceives us. Many of us would claim to not care about anything in the world but even this set of people wouldn't want to be deemed careless but willfully ignorant. To not care implies a degree of coldness which is a badge of honour in the hyper-individualistic society we live in. If someone acts human enough to express a longing for belongingness, they are met with mockery and ridicule. Is there anything worse than wanting to be a part of a community? Apparently not. This is why many abstain from expressing their desire for a shared community where they can express the horrors of being, how it burdens them and what they can do to change it. The society that should have helped its members feel less lost sadly fuels the very fire. To 'act' a certain way, to be a certain way. All one can make of one's life is a long, dreary performance. To always aspire to please others and never cause chaos to the arrangement that helps them stay sedated so that the mirage of a perfect life continues. Henry David Thoreau, the American poet and essayist, wrote in his book *Walden* (1854):

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation."
(Page 43)

Before the war, Septimus seems to have felt a sense of belonging. The war shatters his world. The world has changed for him. Grief has consumed his existence. Peace is the natural state of mind. When we deviate from it, our brain characteristically yearns for it. It is only natural that you feel a certain restlessness. A restlessness that serves as a reminder of what you had once—that is now lost.

The horrors of war leave Septimus with shell shock, now known as PTSD. He struggles to connect with the social circles he once moved in. People find Septimus' case unsettling because he's broken the order that gives the illusion that the society is running smoothly. He has a

natural reaction to the theatre of war and world where there is no catharsis. We are supposed to bottle up our emotions until we can't and that is exactly what happens with Septimus. London, with its bustling post-war life, feels alien to Septimus. He can't reconcile the normalcy he sees around him with the devastation he experienced. This disconnection intensifies his sense of not belonging. Septimus's mental state makes him see the world as a threatening place. Lucrezia does want to help him but she has no idea how. She is helpless. There was a time when she had a seemingly fulfilling marriage, but now in a matter of months, all is changed. Her world is turned upside down. Septimus feels persecuted by unseen forces, which further isolates him from others. The doctor contributes to this feeling of Septimus. Unable to find meaning or connection in a world that seems indifferent to his suffering, Septimus resorts to suicide. Living isn't freedom, Woolf argues through Septimus.

"The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought." - Mrs Dalloway

Mrs. Dalloway transcends the rigid societal expectations of the early 20th century. Beneath the seemingly conventional narrative of a London housewife preparing a party lies a subtle exploration of gender fluidity. Woolf, through the characters of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, challenges the binary definitions of masculinity and femininity, suggesting a spectrum of identity that exists beyond societal constraints.

Society often operates under the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural and preferred way of being. This pervasive idea is known as heteronormativity. It's not just about who we're attracted to, but a whole system of beliefs that shapes expectations about gender roles, relationships, and even family structures. Heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm and if we don't adhere to it, we become the alien being. Though the characters, Septimus and Clarissa, appear to live conventional heterosexual lives, Woolf uses this episodic structure to reveal glimpses of their past experiences that challenge societal norms around gender and sexuality. These "queer moments," like lingering ghosts, continue to disrupt their present sense of order and challenge the expectations placed upon them by a heteronormative society.

Judith Butler, the American post-structuralist and feminist philosopher argues that our ideas of masculinity and femininity aren't natural or fixed. She challenges the assumption that men should act masculine and women feminine, or that these genders are inherently attracted to each other. Our current understanding of gender roles is often mistaken for how things "should" be, rather than simply how they "are" really. This limits our ability to imagine different ways of expressing gender. Instead, Butler proposes that gender is something we perform, not something we are born with. Similar to how certain words can create actions, our actions in expressing masculinity or femininity can create our gender identity. Several gender theorists argue that all individuals have their own unique sexuality. Sexuality is a spectrum. This spectrum reflects the complexities of individual attraction, similar to how gender identity can be fluid. Sometimes, someone's sexual orientation might be unclear or not neatly fit into a specific label. This ambiguity highlights the fluidity of their sexual identity. In a world that believes in binaries, fluidity is met with strong disapproval. Woolf's most famous relationship was with Vita Sackville-West, a writer and socialite. They exchanged passionate love letters, and Woolf dedicated her novel *Orlando* to Vita. Woolf lived in a time when open expressions of homosexuality were risky. Her letters and diaries use coded language that can be interpreted in different ways. Woolf herself said:

"It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple: one must be a woman manly, or a man womanly."

Existentialism grapples with authenticity and living true to oneself. Queer individuals might face pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations. This struggle to reconcile authenticity with societal expectations can heighten existential concerns about who you are and how you want to live. Conversion therapies, religious guilt and a myriad of other unscientific approaches exist for a reason— to not break the order. Even if it requires to maim your true self— a self-mutilation of sorts.

In the novel, Clarissa openly reveals about the romantic feelings she had towards a woman named Sally Seton. Sally was Clarissa's best friend. The two spent many intimate moments together including sharing a tender kiss. This is how Woolf describes the moment when Sally kissed Clarissa:

"Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down!" -Mrs Dalloway

The novel delves into the psyche of Septimus, a war veteran grappling with shell-shock or what is now known as PTSD. Clues hint at his queer identity and possible gender fluidity. His intense grief over his friend Evans, a fellow soldier, suggests a deeper emotional connection. Evans' death triggers Septimus' mental breakdown, implying a significant bond. When Lucrezia, his wife, removed her wedding ring, Septimus thought that their marriage was over *"with agony, with relief"*. Septimus' relationship with his wife seems emotionally distant. This "relief" could signify Septimus feeling a sense of ease after marrying for societal acceptance in a time when homosexuality was not openly acknowledged or accepted. Existentialism explores themes of alienation and isolation. Queer individuals experience marginalization due to their identity, leading to feelings of being different. This can intensify existential questions about belonging and one's place in the world. Queerness itself challenges the arbitrary nature of gender norms and societal expectations around sexuality. This can lead to a heightened awareness of the constructed nature of reality and raise questions about societal power structures and how charlatans of such an absurd society love to run people the way they see fit.

Conclusion

In a world stripped of its meaning, the characters in Mrs Dalloway portray the human struggle to yearn for connection. A yearning so intense, it becomes their identity. Clarissa in an attempt to fill this abyss of hers throws parties but fails miserably as it serves no purpose except for coming across past relations that remind her of a life she could've had. Septimus, in his final act, embraces a connection to the universe, however unconventional. The ending, with the image of a setting sun, reinforces the cyclical nature of life and highlights the ongoing search for meaning that defines human life.

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