

War and its Aftereffects in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract:

This paper presents the aftereffects of World War I. The violence, conflict and turmoil; humans had gone through during the war and after the wars, is presented very well by the modern novelists. Virginia Woolf very beautifully showcases the shell-shock in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Shell-shock is the term coined in World War I to describe the Post-traumatic Stress Disorder which affected the people during and after the Great War. A reaction to the intensity of the bombardment and combat that produced a helpless generation which is always appears in panic and being scared, flight, or an inability to reason, sleep, walk or talk. It is more or less a psychological injury of the war. Although the war has been over for about five years when the novel is set, the residue of paranoia and shell-shock shape the psychology of the characters. Septimus Warren Smith, a World War I veteran, represents the shell-shocked person, suffering from mental distress caused by the hostile scenario of the war he had witnessed. The paper will throw a light on the aftermath of the war through the narrative by Virginia Woolf.

Key words: paranoia, shell-shock, trauma, war.

Mrs Dalloway, a post-World War I novel by Virginia Woolf, depicts one day in June 1923. It shows that five years have passed after the War ended but it still continued to affect those who had lived through it. This paper explores the novel's recreations of trauma and mourning and the aftereffects of the Great War.

The setting of the novel is June 1923 but the First World War (1914–18) still overshadows in *Mrs Dalloway's* hot London air, highlighting how for Britons the trauma of the war was unending, and its devastation still raw and lasting for the people directly or indirectly affected by the War. Repeatedly, the novel exposes how the countless anxieties and devastating anguish of the war were carved into every aspect of post-war life. In the very opening pages it is shown that an aeroplane is flying over London creating uneasiness in the people beneath it because, even on such a pleasant summer day five years after the end of hostilities of the war, the sound of the plane can still 'ominously' bring to mind the German planes that had attacked the capital so frighteningly during the war. As it is seen in the novel that Miss Kilman was dismissed from her teaching post during the war because of her German-sounding surname, only develops the sense of *Mrs Dalloway's* status as, among other things, a war novel of immense importance: 'This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears' (p. 8); 'in all the hat shops and tailors' shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead'. As the mysterious grey car glides through St. James's, it passes, among other onlookers, 'orphans, widows, the War' (p. 17).

The characters in the novel clearly represent the different ideologies of British society following World War I. At the centre of the story, Clarissa Dalloway embodies the feeling of the upper class, "a blockage to change, a love of beauty and familial attachment, but also indifference to others from pride of wealth, blood or position, and a false sense of immunity" (Larson 194). 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 keep hidden. Peter Walsh serves as a challenger 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.

The novel follows the lives of these characters throughout one June day, years after the war has ended. Despite the efforts of these characters to maintain the appearance of continuity and certainty, the manifestation of the trauma of the war recurs 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 Piccadilly. All of the people on the street witness the car driving past slowly with "inscrutable reserve," trying to figure out who could be inside it (p.16). Clarissa, along with the other onlookers, believes that it has to be the Queen, Prime Minister, or royalty of some sort. 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" (p.15). The people who gathered around the mysterious car believe that they are within "speaking distance of the majesty of England" and stand in awe of the British Empire and the idea of its former reality (p.16). Only Septimus, upon seeing the car, expresses a great fear, an intense foreboding of the destructiveness of that reality. 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 glass. This mysterious showing of imagined royalty represents the vanishing power of England's aristocracy and loss of imperial identity after the war.

When the car vanishes down the street, there is a disturbance among the people who had witnessed the event. The appearance of royalty driving through the city creates a stir among the common people and causes them to think “of the dead; of the flag; of the Empire” (p.18). The intrigue surrounding the motorcar evokes a response of uprising in the crowd of people, for the ones who rebelled against the aristocracy and the ones who upheld the tenets of pre-war society. The House of Windsor is insulted in a bar room and a fight ensues. The car and what the power represents causes a ripple of “agitation” amongst the crowd of common people and touches upon emotions that are “very profound” (p.18).

For a moment, the people in the street, with the exception of Septimus, collectively communicate their shared experience. The crowd responds with loyal honour. That honour is the people’s “programmed response” of patriotism, what society believes is the acceptable reaction to royalty and the symbol of their imperial power. But the people seem to make no connections between the aristocracy and accountability for “feeding three million sons into the war machine” (Larson 197). Septimus appears to be the lone witness who sees this intrusion of royalty into the common streets as an omen of destruction and horror. The car, for Septimus, symbolizes an aristocracy that caused the deaths of thousands of soldiers who fought for Great Britain’s army.

Woolf has the car pass through the city and out of sight again, to reveal how removed the aristocracy is from the common people’s reality. The citizens are kept at a great distance from the Empire, and although society reveres their royalty, they also fear it. Woolf is portraying the disconnect that occurs between the two sides: the imperialistic views of the aristocracy that cause the destruction of society and the common experience of the individuals in that devastated society.

At the heart of the novel and the embodiment of stoic, British reserve is Clarissa Dalloway. Keeping in line with the 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 (DeMeester 89). Her response to trauma is to create beauty around her through her artistic expressions, such as gathering flowers for her elaborate party. Although she proves that it is still possible to find beauty in everyday life, “it is too ephemeral to instigate real change,” much like the superficial monuments and tributes that serve as substitutes for the realities of war and death (DeMeester 90).

Clarissa’s illusion of immunity to the devastation created by the war is due to her lack of connection to anyone who died in battle. Clarissa’s only experience is through second-hand accounts through others who have been directly affected, 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 advocated and modelled by the aristocracy; It was taught in schools “as a mode of rule, which wartime propaganda had exploited to mobilize loyal Britons, and which was now sustaining a post-war culture of denial” (Larson 197). Woolf uses Clarissa Dalloway to express what is considered by society as an acceptable defence mechanism.

Although Clarissa appears to the people around her to be emotionally shallow, she reveals her inner turmoil and suffering when she is alone. Clarissa is recovering from an illness in her heart, which could be the manifestation of her “buried psychic pain” (Burian 70). She has to hide how she truly feels and be her composed self in front of others, but when she is left with her own thoughts, she feels a deep “alienation caused by a traumatic shattering of her identity” (Burian 70). In this way, she represents the shattered image of superiority and power of pre-war England. Although she suffers from the devastation of the war, she chooses to adopt the conventional English mode of repression to deal with it. Clarissa chooses not to confront or deal with her emotions and justifies it by claiming “that everyone was unreal in one way,” to make sense of her own denial and align herself with English society’s collective avoidance (p. 171).

Clarissa represents the vanity of British pride and the superiority of society before the war, and society’s attempt to mask the devastation and destruction caused by the war. Peter Walsh refers to her as the “perfect hostess” who would “marry a Prime Minister,” assigning her the same characteristics as the aristocracy (p.7). Although she recognizes this about herself, she feels harshly judged by Peter when he labels her as such. She obviously adheres to the structure and superiority of her class, and even though she is obviously self-conscious of that role at times, she defends her imperialistic attitude as an expression of her artistic contribution to society.

She becomes depressed when she thinks of how Peter and Richard both criticize her for her parties because they do not understand the sense of them. Clarissa believes that they are her “offering” (p. 121). In an effort to contribute something of value to the world, Clarissa believes that she must bring people together, and that providing a space for community, she can avoid suffering. Clarissa tries to create a sense of belonging by gathering a group of like-minded people who share the same aristocratic view of England to encourage and foster her denial of reality.

At Clarissa’s party that evening, the Prime Minister makes an appearance in the Dalloway’s home. The arrival of royalty takes the notice of all of the guests, for they know that this is “majesty passing; this symbol of what they all stood for, English society” (p. 172). Woolf is using the guests at Clarissa’s party to represent the upper class of English society as a whole. As the Prime Minister walks through the room, the guests, collectively, reveal their allegiance to those ideals of the aristocracy and their obliviousness to the realities of the war. As Clarissa escorts the Prime Minister through the party, beaming with pride at the triumph, she acknowledges that “these triumphs had a hollowness...they satisfied her no longer as they used” (p. 174). Even though Clarissa upholds the aristocracy’s view of conventional society on the outside, she knows, and has repressed, the pain that it has caused.

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" (p. 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 (p. 184). If Clarissa justifies the death as an artistic expression instead of an absolute end, she can avoid having to face the "profound darkness" that she fears (p. 185).

Before she returns to her guests at the party, she resolves that Septimus has "made her feel the beauty," and in a matter of moments, Clarissa convinces herself that death is an expression of beauty to be celebrated, not mourned (p. 186). Throughout the novel, Clarissa remains the ideal of British stoicism in her reactions to emotionally traumatic events. She "ends the day as she began it, believing the war is over" (Levenback 81). Even when death appears at her party to confront her, she finds a way to deny its impact, and in the place of emotional expression, she chooses to process Septimus' suicide as a beautiful artistic expression.

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 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, he realizes that he is not a part of that society any more.

Septimus recounts how he felt about England before the war and why he volunteered to serve in the military in the first place. He, like most young men, joined the army to protect and preserve his own version of idyllic England, which consisted of "Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress" (p. 86). In the simplicity of his youth, he became a victim of the propaganda of the aristocracy which inspired him to fight for something that he could not have when the war was over.

He attempts to latch onto those memories of his past with art and literature, trying to ground himself to something that he once loved, but he feels "that the war invalidated the fundamental beliefs that had given his pre-war life meaning" (DeMeester 81). He feels nothing for the things and people, including his wife, that he cared for before he suffered the experience of war, and he can no longer relate to the values and ideals of the society in which he is forced to exist. He is the living symbol of the post-war collapse of British civilization. Just as the foundation of society had been devastated by the war, Septimus' identity as a man within that society is destroyed.

Septimus exhibits the symptoms of shell shock, or post-traumatic stress disorder, which contradicts the social expectations of the masculine role in society. Soldiers went to war to protect and preserve England's status as a world power, and society expected the soldier to be the same man when he returned from battle. If there is any question or disillusionment about the system, the soldiers are not viewed as heroes, but as dissenters. Septimus is a tragic symbol of what many men became just after the war, suffering from what was labeled "male hysteria," an illness of emotional distress usually attributed to women in the Victorian era (Showalter 170). 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 and a trial of the Victorian masculine ideal" (Showalter 171). 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 the masculine role.

Septimus could not uphold the stoic façade that was expected of him. The war was a "psychic cave of memory and trauma" that revealed itself, often in public (Norris 64). He has visions of death, with hallucinations of his fallen comrade, Evans, in the bushes at the park. The fractured state of his psyche and the horrific visions he has are a result of the trauma he has experienced in the war, but the people around him do not react to his openly strange behaviour with empathy or understanding. His own wife, Rezia, cannot see beyond the masculine expectations that Septimus now fails to meet, declaring that it "was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself," when her husband threatens to commit suicide (p. 23). Even his doctors tell Septimus that his behavior would give Rezia an "odd idea of English husbands," indicating that he should conform to the role of masculinity that society has established for him and that the option to do so is completely under his control (p. 92).

Feeling constricted by the conventional mold for a proper English gentleman, Septimus describes the prescription of his doctors as an act of torture. When Septimus refers to Dr. Holmes and his treatment, he says, "The rack and thumbscrew are applied. Human nature is remorseless" (p. 98). Septimus cannot return to his prewar self, just as England cannot reclaim its prewar glory, even though society expects him to be able to transform. Human nature, or Holmes, is the "repulsive brute, with blood red nostrils" who forces English propriety upon him (p. 92). Holmes is the personification of the collective opinion of society that believes Septimus should, and must, uphold the English tenets of masculinity. Septimus realizes that the doctors are not interested in helping him, but only want to control how he lives. Although Septimus sees the inadequacy of the doctors' assessments, he still feels the weight of their commands. Holmes and Bradshaw "mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted (p. 148). Even though he cannot externally combat the will of his caretakers, Septimus fights against conformity to their idea of normality. He sees them as the dictators who enforce the will of an Empire that is destroying him, and the humanity in the society.

Septimus sees death as an end to his isolation and oppression; he knows there is no place in this world for him, and the laws of human nature will not allow him to stay. He demands that Rezia burn all of his papers, his drawings and scribbles, because they represent all of the illusions of the world that frustrate him. With the destruction of his creations, he lets go of the expectations placed upon him to uphold imperialistic and archaic ideals. Septimus commits suicide, not because he wants to die, but because he feels that he has committed an "appalling crime and had been condemned to death by human nature" (p. 96). His crime was his inability to conform, and society had condemned him for expressing his true self.

He commits suicide, not as a desperate act of sadness, but as a wilful expression of his freedom from the tyrannical oppression of societal rules. Just before his death, he accepts his fate, saying, "There remained only the window...it was their idea of tragedy, not his..." (p. 149). Septimus throws himself out of the window to his death as his final act, breaking out of the chains of conformity.

Septimus knows that he cannot live in the world, because the world that he knew before the war, no longer exists. The mental illness with which Septimus suffers is the result of the failure of those antiquated ideals and causes the destruction of his identity as a man in English society. Woolf uses Septimus as a metaphor for the same dismantling of the pre-war identity of England. Through Septimus Smith, she holds the ruling class accountable for "presiding over a bloody debacle in the name of an England that was passing away" (Larson 194). His death represents a death of the thoughts of convention and conformity to the idea of pre-war England, its superiority, power, and stability.

Woolf's commentary in *Mrs. Dalloway* attacks the aristocracy and its obliviousness to the destruction, the mindlessness of a nation that continued to support that archaic system, and the inhumane treatment of the many civilian and military sufferers of war-induced trauma. She uses the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* to express the disillusionment and devastation to humanity as a result of the war. Through Septimus Smith, a shell-shock war veteran, she illustrates the most extreme form of trauma, and in turn, he represents the shell shock that all citizens experienced. "In post-war English society, both war veterans and civilians struggle to survive the havoc of the Great War," and in this way, Clarissa and Septimus are two sides of the same coin (Tsai 65). Both struggle with trauma caused by the war, but they choose to express it differently.

Although *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place on one day in June, five years after the war has ended, Woolf wants to illustrate that the pain and suffering does not just disappear after the soldiers are buried. Woolf was chiefly concerned with conveying the true nature of the devastation inflicted upon England, and *Mrs. Dalloway* is her "portrayal of individuals as victims of war...and the possible annihilation of civilization" (Bazin and Lauter 14). The lasting effects of World War I are apparent in the most extreme expression of mental illness in Septimus Smith and the repressed emotional pain of Clarissa Dalloway.

Woolf represents a society that collectively suffers, despite the individual's best efforts to uphold a "perfectly upright and stoical bearing" (p. 9). 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 Holmes and Bradshaw. 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.

Indeed, *Mrs. Dalloway* is a fictional account of the impact of the First World War on British society – and the way 'military music' (p. 117) still resounds within London's streets and messages continue to be transmitted from 'the Fleet to the Admiralty' (p. 6) – it is unmatched.

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