

Modernist Voices in *Mrs. Dalloway*: A Study of Mental Health, Gender, and Woolf's Narrative InnovationMuhammad Yousaf Khan*¹, Nasir Jamal Khattak²**Original Article**

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Abstract

This paper investigates Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway as a pivotal work in modernist literature, focusing on its exploration of mental health, gender roles, and narrative innovation. The study seeks to analyze how Woolf's innovative narrative techniques and thematic concerns contribute to our understanding of these issues. Mrs. Dalloway is a key text in modernist literature, noted for its deep psychological insight and narrative experimentation. The novel portrays complex themes such as mental health and gender roles within the context of post-World War I England. Woolf's use of stream of consciousness and fragmented narrative structure reflects broader modernist concerns and feminist critiques, making it a significant subject for literary analysis. The study employs a textual analysis of Mrs. Dalloway. It draws on theoretical frameworks from modernist literature, feminist criticism, and psychological theory to examine Woolf's portrayal of mental health, gender roles, and narrative innovation. The analysis reveals that Woolf's depiction of mental health through characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith offers a nuanced view of psychological distress and societal neglect. The study also highlights how Woolf critiques traditional gender roles through her characters and narrative structure. Furthermore, her use of stream of consciousness and non-linear time underscores her modernist experimentation and contributes to feminist literary criticism. Future research should explore the intersections of mental health and narrative techniques in modernist literature and assess the impact of Woolf's innovations on subsequent literary movements. Further studies could also examine how historical and cultural contexts influence the portrayal of gender and mental health in modernist texts, providing new insights into Woolf's influence on contemporary feminist and psychological criticism.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *Mrs. Dalloway*; mental health; gender roles; modernist literature; narrative innovation; stream of consciousness.

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is a powerful text of modernist literature. It is a celebrated work due to its narrative innovation and thoughtful analysis of social and psychological themes. Published in 1925, this novel captures a snapshot of a single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a woman from the upper stratum living in post-World War I London. The narration of the story is interlaced with the lives of other characters, particularly Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran struggling with severe mental health issues. Woolf employs stream of consciousness technique to demonstrate the flow of thoughts and feelings, which is central to the thematic depth and narrative structure of the novel.

This paper deals with three essential and basic characteristics of *Mrs. Dalloway* namely the treatment of mental health, Woolf's presentation of gender roles and her narrative technique.

Each of these three areas has its own importance. They are necessary to understand how much the novel contributes to feminist criticism and modernist literature.

Woolf draws a far more complex picture of mental illness in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Thus, with the character of Septimus Werren Smith and his portrayal, Woolf creates a bold yet painful picture of societal apathy resulting in mental sickness. Septimus is a war veteran, encased in his nightmarish memories of the horrors of war. He suffers from bouts of paranoid psychosis with acute hallucinations—a state of mind that is today defined as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Woolf sheds light on this state of mind by portraying the mental condition of Septimus, as people were highly unaware and relatively foolish compared to what we know about the ailment nowadays, which reflects that the early 20th century society failed at acknowledging the mentally ill individuals.

In contrast, Clarissa Dalloway's inner turmoil symbolizes another facet of mental health problems. Though hardly an overt victim of mental sickness, Clarissa wrestles with ennui and existential matters. In her reflections on life, identity, and existence in general, she reveals the thoughts that are constantly strolling through her mind, and the inner shearing anxiety that originates from mental isolation. By following the mental world of these two characters, Woolf paints a picture of her concern about how social expectations combine with the complexity of the mind to prevent any real chance of maintaining sanity and mental wellbeing.

Gender roles are another element of *Mrs. Dalloway*. It is an account of the expectations society had from its women in post-World War I England and having been born into that tier of English society, Clarissa carries out her double chore as a nurturing mother, and a dutiful wife. But she is miserable — because these roles are stuck on her by tradition, and she craves liberation and fulfillment. The reader can discern her discontent and subsequent desire for peace of mind from the self-reflection that occurs in her inner monologue.

Moreover, Virginia Woolf's use of stream of consciousness—an innovative narrative technique—is a hallmark of *Mrs. Dalloway*. This technique takes the readers on a journey into the deeper recesses of the characters' private and inner lives, where they can see individuals' feelings, thoughts, and emotions in a realistic and natural shape. The stream of consciousness technique gives the author access to the complex landscape of the psyche where they can examine the complex identity crisis troubling the characters. Thus, they can better fathom the general complexities of mental health with immediacy and profundity.

Modernist anxieties and existential concerns with reality and time are evident in the structure of the novel. Woolf uses a non-linear method of narration in the novel. She intertwines the phases of time where its traditional flow is broken so that the characters intermittently shuttle between present and past. By employing this narrative approach, Woolf challenges the conventional concept of linear story-telling. Thus, the readers gain a higher level of comprehension regarding the psychological condition of the characters on one hand, and on the other, witness the fluidity and intransience of experience and time moving to and fro with no fixed logic of the physical world.

Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is an impactful work with a unique identity in modernist literature. It gives insights into her engagement with the issues of mental health, and the imposed gender roles in the post-World War I England, through her experimental narrative innovations. Woolf uses stream of consciousness technique to depict the social and psychological issue of her time. This enables her to convey her profound thoughts on the societal norms, gender roles, and general human condition during the early 20th century England. The novel is still relevant to the contemporary world. It still sustains its significance in the current deliberations on feminist

criticism, and mental health questions. This highlights how vital and influential the novel is, even after the laps of almost a century after its publication.

This paper will further discuss these subjects, probing into how Woolf's innovative techniques and thematic concerns add to our comprehension of the present-day literary discourse in juxtaposition with Woolf's contemporary society of post-World War I England. By analyzing *Mrs. Dalloway* from these perspectives, readers can achieve a deeper appreciation of Woolf's contributions to feminist thought and the larger modernist literature.

Literature Review

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly regarding its portrayal of mental health, its examination of gender roles, and its introduction of modernist narrative innovations to modern literature in terms of narrative technique of stream of consciousness. This literature review will explore these aspects in detail, drawing on key works and critical analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of the novel's impact and significance.

Woolf's portrayal of mental health issue in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the topic that has elicited much commendation and scholarly debate since the beginning. She engages with the societal indifference and the consequent psychological torment, and gives an insightful peek into the inner lives of Septimus and Clarissa, depicting their particular mental health issues. DeMeester (1998) stresses the need of acknowledging Clarissa Dalloway's inner turmoil in the backdrop of the early 20th century societal demands, social norms and the wider post-war trauma. Clarissa's ennui and her existential anxieties reflect the heavy weight of cultural constraints, societal demands, and her personal disappointment leading to severe mental health issues. According to DeMeester (1998), Clarissa's mental struggle is a metaphor for the larger existential crisis that many people experienced in the years following World War I. Woolf sensitively and perceptively captures Clarissa's intense sense of inner turmoil and loneliness that emerges from her contemplations on life, love, and identity (DeMeester, 1998, p. 102). The illustration of what appears to be Clarissa's thought process gives us a very interesting picture of how societal expectations mixed with personal experience can affect mental health.

DeMeester (2007) contends, however, that Septimus's experiences in *Mrs. Dalloway* are a reflection of society's larger disregard for mental health problems, especially in light of post-traumatic stress disorder. Septimus is presented as a victim of his own inner turmoil as well as the indifference of a society that refuses to acknowledge or treat his ailment. Thus, the novel's war veteran, Septimus, now clearly seen to suffer from what was not yet known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is both a victim of his own mental fragility and the insensitivity of a society that does not properly acknowledge or treat it. Woolf's portrayal of Septimus, according to DeMeester (2007), emphasizes the early 20th-century stigma attached to psychological disease and the inadequacies of the mental health care systems (DeMeester, 2007, p. 89). This portrayal provides a critical remark on the lack of empathy for and understanding of mental health concerns by highlighting the disparity between individual sufferings and social responses.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf engages in a multilayered critique that rises above the narrative's surface themes of time, memory, and consciousness. According to Jeremy Tambling (1989), the novel invites scholarly interest for its stream of consciousness technique and its insights on temporality, but at a deeper level, it critiques the designs of the Empire and the repercussions of war. Woolf embodies this critique through her portrayal of the state as a patriarchal power structure. This is evident in Richard Dalloway's cynical reference to "our detestable social system," echoing Woolf's own declaration of intent: "In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticize the social

system and to show it at work, in its most intense” (as cited in Tambling, 1989, p. XX). The novel, thus, becomes a meditation on the destructive power of societal norms, especially in post-war Britain, where the state upholds repressive structures that regulate individual lives.

Tambling (1989) also highlights how *Mrs. Dalloway* foregrounds mental instability as a dominant theme, illustrating the broader historical context of increasing medicalization. This medicalization involves society’s readiness to label people as mentally ill and the fixation on nerves and instability. The novel focuses on how individuals, particularly the war-torn character Septimus Warren Smith, are pressured to “compose” their fragmented selves into a unified identity. The internal struggles of Septimus symbolize the early 20th century’s adherence to conformity and order as dictated by the social structures. They were obsessed with the ideals of individual control and personal autonomy, and they would never compromise on it regardless of threats to individual’s mental wellbeing. Through the depiction of this approach, Woolf challenges the inflexible social conventions for measuring mental stability, which lay heavy on person’s inner and outer lives. This theme of bitter societal dictates is parallel to Virginia Woolf’s personal problems of mental ailment echoing her censure of and revolt against the patriarchal system.

Feminist criticism generally concentrates on the representation of Woolf’s outlook on gender roles in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. She deconstructs the rampant concepts of gender roles in the post-World War I England, echoing her displeasure with, and her smashing review of, the cultural and social confines marked for women folk. Examining Woolf’s stance on the orthodox gender roles, Showalter (1977) records that Woolf depicts the societal roles levied on Clarissa, and her internal struggle with her own desires. Showalter (1977) further contends that Clarissa is upset by her tedious duties of being a caring wife and a nurturing mother. This, in turn, is a wide-ranging critique of how women of that time were encased to curb their rights and abilities. Woolf depicts Clarissa as a woman who has rebellious notions against the societal norms, and who longs for personal autonomy and mental peace, subverting the prevalent patriarchal structures defining women’s existence. According to Showalter (1977), Woolf condemned male dominance which sought to constrict women fulfillment through its created gender norms. By illustrating how Clarissa struggles with the societal chains and her longing for liberation, Woolf lashes her critique of the then prevalent societal expectations and exploitations (Showalter, 1977).

David Bradshaw (2016) reads the novel from still another perspective. He scrutinizes Woolf’s representation of the issue of gender roles in the post-World War I England, when the society was in the clutches of patriarchal structures with only limited space for women folk. According to Bradshaw (2016), Woolf’s two female characters, Sally Seton and Miss Killman, are a reflection of her take on female experience. While the former is a metaphor for a rebellion against women suppression, the latter is an epitome of the older conservative ideals of conformity and order injected to women by the society. Bradshaw’s analysis mirrors how Woolf’s portrayal of gender roles in *Mrs. Dalloway* echoes a more nuanced and unique analysis of patriarchal norms, offering a unique version of female resistance and quest for identity (Bradshaw, 2016).

Woolf entered into radical confrontation with the patriarchal structures and social norms of post-World War I England. This has drawn the attention of feminist critics towards the themes explored in *Mrs. Dalloway*. For Toril Moi (1985), Woolf writes in a “deconstructive” form uncovering the inherent ambivalence in the common discourse. Her innovative structure of narration deconstructs the conventional notions of gender roles turning tables on Victorian ideals of male supremacy and women conformity with the norms devised for them by the dominant male. Thus, Woolf poses an open threat to the biased and strict canons of how the early 20th century society measured sanity and how they believed in the patriarchal footings of the society. This deconstruction of these realities is discernable when she juxtaposes Septimus Smith and

Clarissa Dalloway, where the boundaries between madness and sanity, and individual disaster and societal accomplishment are almost erased. Septimus, suffering from what would now be recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), serves as a symbol of the failure of patriarchal ideals that demand emotional repression and stoicism. Meanwhile, Clarissa, though outwardly more “sane” by societal standards, also grapples with feelings of alienation and existential dread.

Woolf’s feminist critique goes beyond individual psychology to encompass a broader societal critique. In *Virginia Woolf as Feminist* (2019), Naomi Black describes Woolf’s feminism as “deeply radical” and “transformational” (Black, 2019). Woolf advocates for a fundamental reinvention of gender norms, recognizing that the degradation of women under patriarchy is matched by the moral corruption of men who uphold and benefit from these oppressive systems. Woolf’s radical stance is reflected in her exploration of how societal structures, such as the family and the state, reinforce traditional gender roles, thereby stifling individual freedom and creativity. For Woolf, liberation from these constraints requires not only personal transformation but also a societal revolution.

Mark Hussey (1986) further supports this interpretation, arguing that Woolf’s concern is not with depicting an objective reality, but with presenting the subjective experience of the world. This focus on personal experience allows Woolf to reveal the internalized oppressions that her characters endure. The novel, rather than adhering to a conventional narrative, instead delves into the psychological realities of its characters, thereby exposing the emotional and existential struggles hidden beneath societal facades. As Hussey (1986) notes, Woolf shifts attention away from external events and towards the inner life, a move that challenges the notion of a singular, stable reality and emphasizes the fluidity of personal experience (Hussey, 1986).

David Bradshaw (2016) expands this argument by highlighting how Woolf’s critique of war and militarism permeates the novel. He points to a seemingly trivial reference to cadets in the novel as a “signpost” that underscores the pervasive influence of war in shaping all aspects of life. The novel shows how war not only transforms soldiers like Septimus into emotionally and mentally fractured beings, but also affects the broader social order, as militaristic values seep into everyday life. The war’s impact is not confined to the battlefield but extends into the domestic and psychological realms, as young boys are turned into soldiers, and society adopts a militarized outlook on order and discipline.

Alex Zwerdling’s (1977) seminal work, *Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System*, is pivotal in shaping the critical understanding of Woolf’s engagement with social critique. Zwerdling argues that Woolf’s aim in the novel is not merely to evoke poetic reverie or human vision, but to critique the social system “at its most intense” (Zwerdling, 1977). Woolf’s focus on the daily lives of her characters, particularly their emotional and mental states, serves as a vehicle for this critique. Zwerdling’s later work, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986), further emphasizes Woolf’s engagement with the “facts” of social life, demonstrating that her concern with individual consciousness is deeply intertwined with her critique of social and political realities (Zwerdling, 1986). Similarly, Richard Pearce (1987), in his praises Zwerdling’s work for bridging the gap between Woolf’s literary vision and the concrete realities of her time (Pearce, 1987).

Mrs. Dalloway is often heralded as a quintessential example of modernist experimentation, particularly in its narrative structure and technique. Woolf’s use of stream of consciousness, a technique that captures the continuous flow of characters’ thoughts and feelings, represents a radical departure from traditional narrative forms. The Stream of Consciousness is a term coined and used by the twentieth-century psychologist William James who described it in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) as: “the looking into our own minds and

reporting what we there discover” (p. 185). It is also referred to as “the flow of inner experiences” (Cuddon, 1999). Woolf—being the major exemplary authorial figure that utilized and developed this dominant technique that characterizes the modernist novel, the Stream of Consciousness and Interior Monologue—believed that:

Modern fiction needed to break from previous generic conventions in order to express life properly, and their initial exploration of the possibilities of a subjective as opposed to asocial and mimetic realism. A fundamental aspect of their new realism was a shift of focus in the representation of character and consciousness, in the light of the pervasive influence of psychological thought at the turn of the century, and how it repositioned the individual in relation to the world around him. This is not to say that earlier writers were not concerned with the pulse and vagaries of the human psyche (Parsons, 2007).

This technique allows Woolf to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of her characters, revealing their inner lives in a way that conventional third-person narratives cannot.

Cuddy-Keane (2005) examines Woolf’s narrative innovations, arguing that her use of stream of consciousness and non-linear time reflects broader modernist concerns with fragmentation and subjectivity. According to Cuddy-Keane (2005), Woolf’s approach challenges linear storytelling by interweaving past and present, thus mirroring the complexities of human consciousness and experience (Cuddy-Keane, 2005). This fragmentation, on the one hand, shows Woolf’s stylistic choice, while on the other, it points to how much individuals were disintegrated and dislocated—both mentally and physically—by the post-World War I aftershocks. Thus, her narrative style allows the readers to engage with the characters and immerse in their existential experiences. It also sheds light on the demolition of traditional social fabric, conventional societal structures, and loss of identity, issues which are dominant thematic apprehensions of modernism.

Examining Woolf’s experimental narrative style, Elizabeth Abel (1993) posits that *Mrs. Dalloway* deviate from the established norms of storytelling. Elizabeth Abel (1993) further argues that Woolf employs fragmented narrative format to depict the fragile and split nature of human experience while treating the flow of time in a singularly non-linear manner with abrupt to and fro movement. This approach towards time and narration gives a clear passage into the psychological conditions of the characters underscoring the fluidity and mutability of memory and time (Abel, 1993). Woolf avoids using a traditional, linear plot to shoot and record the complicated nature of existence in the modern world presenting a reliable picture of human consciousness.

Mrs. Dalloway is a complicated novel which resists simplistic readings. The novel examines the inner lives of its characters, while simultaneously battering the repressive and male dominated social system of post-World War I England. Woolf skillfully interweaves philosophical, political and personal issues to give a panoramic view of the early 20th century stuck in the aftermaths of the World War I, securing a permanent seat among the most celebrated modernist writers. She explores the existential themes of gender, war, mental trauma, and fragile nature of personal identity, offering valuable insights on the miserable human condition. Woolf in her personal account writes that she desired to represent “life and death, sanity ad insanity,” while also censoring the community structures that aggravated these phenomena. Woolf offers a nuanced interpretation of the society both on collective as well as individual plane, through making characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* expose the inherent dichotomies and contradictions within the framework of the society.

The vast critical lineage of *Mrs. Dalloway* testifies how significant the novel is in the modernist critique of the popular apathy towards mental health issues and towards the repressive gender roles. Woolf's singularly innovative narration using the stream of consciousness technique and her depiction of time as a non-linear and fluctuating phenomenon reflects modernist concerns with fragmentation and subjectivity. The novel depicts mental health problems through the characters of Septimus and Clarissa, and gives an awakening alarm on individual disillusionment due to societal indifference. Moreover, Woolf's engagement with gender roles jolts the outmoded societal rules accentuating the limitations put on women in early 20th century England. The exploration of these issues emphasizes *Mrs. Dalloway's* worth and enduring relevance in feminist and modernist literary scholarship.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, combining literary analysis with theoretical frameworks from modernist studies, feminist criticism, and psychological theory. The analysis is based on a close reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, supported by secondary sources including scholarly articles, books, and critical essays.

The research is organized into three primary areas of focus: the portrayal of mental health, the representation of gender roles, and Woolf's narrative innovations. Each area is examined through a combination of textual analysis and critical interpretation, drawing on established theories and recent scholarship to contextualize Woolf's work within both her historical period and contemporary literary discourse.

Results and Discussion

Mental Health

Clarissa Dalloway's interior monologue offers an exclusive aspect of Woolf's examination of the working of human consciousness and mental health. Her emotional battles and existential reveries are shown using the narrative technique of stream of consciousness, which displays her broodings and a sense of emotional alienation. Woolf's picturization of Clarissa's mental condition echoes the larger subjects of self-perception, and personal identity. This further allows the readers to gauge the psychological impingement as well as emotional damage caused by the clash between yearning for self-fulfillment and societal demands.

The novel can be interpreted as a profound exploration of Virginia Woolf's psychological landscape. Woolf examines various existential conditions, delving into the complexities of human anxiety while emphasizing the absurdity inherent in the human experience and historical progression. Her personal struggles with mental breakdowns and chronic anxiety inform her literary work, leading her to engage deeply with themes that transcend mere perception. She states that her writing seeks to capture the subtleties and depth which transcends the the scope of realism. Consequently, her novels illustrate how the past continually influences the present, employing a time-shifting technique that oscillates between analepsis and prolepsis. As for Virginia Woolf her meditation on time, its contraction and expansion, the permanence of the past in the present were her main questions and having greater thematic relevance to her outlook.

Woolf's narrative approach emphasizes the vulnerability of her characters, suggesting that "the writer has somehow to convey such mental impressions without worrying about representing external material" (Goldman, 2006). In *The Common Reader* (1925), she articulates that "The proper stuff of fiction" does not exist; rather, every thought, feeling, and nuance of human experience contributes to the fabric of fiction (Woolf, 1925). This perspective allows her to construct multidimensional characters that inhabit her narratives.

In her novel, Woolf aims to portray “the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side (Woolf & Woolf (1953).” This duality is embodied in the characters of Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, a woman deemed ‘sane,’ and Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran labeled as ‘insane.’ Both characters confront societal oppression manifested through the brutality, meaninglessness, and isolation of modern British society. The distinctions between sanity and insanity blur, as the perceived normalcy of Mrs. Dalloway and her peers is often called into question, highlighting their precarious mental states in comparison to Septimus. This reference of sanity and insanity also resonate with Woolf’s own mental condition. Following the death of her brother, Woolf spent several months in a sanatorium due to her mental health struggles, which included episodes of incoherence that varied in duration from a few days to several months. Remarkably, Woolf harnessed these depressive episodes as a ‘mental advantage,’ using her experiences of illness as a means of emotional release. She described this process as an “act of release,” positing that “what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness” (Gordon, 1986).

Woolf also captures Clarissa’s disillusionment with the upper class, who “reacted with stoic denial” (Showalter, 2011) to the horrors and tragedies of the Great War. Clarissa’s frustration with this perceived indifference towards life in post-war England reflects her struggle to comprehend the changes around her. Septimus’s return from the war, marked by mental trauma, parallels the character Kurtz from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), who also grapples with disillusionment stemming from the British colonial experience in the Congo, and who “does not even wink while taking human lives... (Khan & Khattak, 2020).” Woolf presents Septimus as a character who

would argue [...] about killing themselves, and explain how wicked people were, how he could see them making up lies as they passed in the street. He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the making of the world, he said.” (Woolf, 1925)

Showalter (2011) further notes that Septimus “feels so much because others feel too little” (Showalter, 2011), which underscores Clarissa’s acute sensitivity to her surroundings. Her emotional tumult becomes evident as her thoughts and feelings ebb and flow, suggesting that she, too, might be grappling with profound emotional turbulence. Woolf uses this subtle investigation into the characters’ flow of thought to describe the complex interaction between the mental states of sanity and insanity, which, in a holistic sense, is emblematic of the workings of human psyche troubled by society’s demands of conformity and personal agony.

Woolf’s manner of highlighting mental health problems in *Mrs. Dalloway* mirrors the dominant power of modernist philosophy on her world view. The terrible emotional state of Septimus Warren Smith indicates how the post-war trauma, lack of emotional support and curse of societal apathy impinged the victims of mental ailment. Woolf shows Septimus’s miserable mental condition and his ultimate suicide to illustrate the apathetic approach towards the ailment in the historical milieu of the post-World War I England. The uneven and incoherent storyline is symbolic of Septimus’s psychic world. This almost rambling narrative as a metaphor for Septimus’s psychic chaos hints at the sad reality of how insufficient the then psychiatric treatment was. This incompetence and societal apathy led the victims of mental health issues to harbour profound sense of marginalization, thus putting them to an indiscernible but enduring torture.

Mrs. Dalloway dwells on the theme of emotional paralysis, a curse of modern times. It stresses the devastating burdens of modern-day existence, which give the victims a profound feeling of numbness and listlessness, creating a deep sense of alienation from the world around them. This disconnect reveals a loss of communication with the other individuals in the society echoing the blurred fine line between sanity and insanity, with no fixed boundaries between the

two. Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked victim of World War I, illustrates these pressures through his descriptions of disorder, degradation, and the corruption of modern life. He poignantly asks, "The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?" (Woolf, 1925). His emotional paralysis, the first sign of his mental illness, becomes apparent when he reacts with detachment to the death of his friend Evans during the war. Instead of mourning, he congratulates himself for "feeling very little and very reasonably" (Woolf, 1925), revealing how the brutality of war has numbed his emotions. The war provided him with a false identity of heroism, temporarily allowing him to survive with his humanity intact: "The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive" (Woolf, 1925).

However, as memories of Evans begin to haunt him, Septimus experiences a growing sense of shame and self-disgust, realizing the depth of his emotional void. His guilt intensifies when he marries an Italian woman, Lucrezia, without truly loving her. As Lyndall Gordon explains, Septimus sees no difference between the organized violence of the war that claimed Evans' life and the casual cruelty of everyday civilian life (Gordon, 1986), where "their starched shirt fronts ooz[ed] thick drops of vice" (Woolf, 1925). This blurring of boundaries between normalcy and abnormality underscores Woolf's exploration of how the constructs of sanity and insanity are closely intertwined. Woolf's own experiences with mental illness further suggest that these moments of emotional and psychological disarray can also serve as sources of extraordinary creativity, fueling artistic and literary expression.

Septimus's trauma, which stems from his experiences as a war veteran, is ongoing, as he continues to feel the conflict even after it has officially ended. Cathy Caruth (as cited in Ward, 2015) defines trauma as the "overwhelming experience of sudden and catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Ward, 2015)." Septimus's trauma, in line with Caruth's definition, is not fully realized at the moment of the event but unfolds belatedly through recurring memories and hallucinations. His condition reflects the broader societal issue of post-war emotional collapse, as many men, like Septimus, suffered from what was termed "male hysteria," a diagnosis typically associated with women in the Victorian era (Showalter, 2011). The war created a crisis of masculinity, as the trauma experienced by soldiers shattered the traditional Victorian masculine ideal (Showalter, 2011).

Woolf portrays Septimus as a man who can no longer conform to the rigid expectations of British masculinity. The war, a "psychic cave of memory and trauma" (Norris, 2009), has left him with fractured thoughts and visions of death, including hallucinations of his fallen comrade Evans. Despite these clear signs of psychological distress, Septimus is met with indifference and a lack of empathy from those around him. His wife, Rezia, for instance, views his suicidal thoughts as cowardly, remarking, "It was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself" (Woolf, 1925). Even his doctors dismiss his condition, suggesting that his behavior could give Rezia an "odd idea of English husbands" and implying that it is within his power to simply conform to societal expectations (Woolf, 1925).

Septimus's inability to return to his pre-war identity reflects the larger disillusionment of post-war society. He knows the world he once knew no longer exists, and his mental illness signifies the failure of the outdated ideals that defined British masculinity. Through Septimus, Woolf critiques the ruling class for their role in "presiding over a bloody debacle in the name of an England that was passing away" (Larson, 2012). His eventual death symbolizes the collapse of pre-war ideals of conformity, power, and stability, marking the end of an era and the dismantling

of the myth of England's superiority. Septimus's tragic fate thus becomes a metaphor for the dissolution of an entire national identity in the aftermath of war.

Gender Roles

Woolf's examination of gender roles in *Mrs. Dalloway* critiques the constraints placed on women in post-war Britain. Clarissa Dalloway's life, marked by societal expectations and domestic responsibilities, serves as a commentary on the limited roles available to women. Woolf's narrative highlights the internal conflict experienced by Clarissa as she grapples with her own desires and societal pressures.

In the Victorian era, women were expected to fulfill only one role: to marry and support their husbands' careers and responsibilities. The institution of marriage posed a threat to women's identities, as depicted in *Mrs. Dalloway* through Clarissa Dalloway, whose home becomes central to her life. Woolf highlights how marriage can dominate an individual's existence by focusing on the title "Mrs.," which reflects Clarissa's new, permanent identity. Beauvoir (2011) explains that, in marriage, "She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other 'half'.... she is annexed to her husband's universe" (Beauvoir, 2011).

Woolf portrays Clarissa as a woman who is not truly living, but merely existing, constrained by societal expectations. In patriarchal societies, upper-class women are expected to be housewives, dependent on their husbands for emotional and financial support. They are supposed to be "like an angel" in the house as caring wives and mothers. This creates an internal conflict for Clarissa, as she struggles between societal expectations and her own desire for independence (Wu, 2019). Woolf illustrates the dual identities that women must navigate—both their individual selves and the roles they share with others. Ironically, Clarissa's sense of security allows her to spend much of her time alone, reflecting her isolation even within her marriage.

Clarissa's marriage to Richard Dalloway is not a pursuit of comfort or fulfillment but rather a search for autonomy and privacy. She seeks independence to handle personal matters privately, showing her respect for her individuality, even after marriage. Beauvoir (2011) points out that "Woman weighs so heavily on man because she is forbidden to rely on herself" (Beauvoir, 2011). Men are positioned as the "self," while women are relegated to the "other," existing in relation to men. Although Clarissa maintains distance from others, her inner world is rich with emotions. At her party, she remains unaware of how people perceive her, suggesting that she may continue living without forming deep connections (Williams, 2013).

The concept of "transcendence and immanence," as discussed by Beauvoir (2011), plays a significant role in understanding the gender dynamics of the time. Men are encouraged to act with transcendence, asserting power and authority, while women are expected to remain submissive and dependent. For centuries, these external pressures have shaped gender roles and created expectations that conflict with individual identities. Woolf captures these struggles in *Mrs. Dalloway* through the character of Clarissa and her acquaintances, reflecting the mental health issues and existential crises that arise from the clash between societal expectations and personal autonomy.

Clarissa's parties serve a dual purpose: they are a way for her to bring joy to others in dark times, and they also provide her with a sense of purpose. She welcomes guests with warmth, saying it is "delightful" to see them. Beauvoir (2011) notes that women often "seek relief in social life," attaching great importance to gatherings like Clarissa's parties (Beauvoir, 2011). Without an independent existence of their own, women often rely on the company of others. As Clarissa reflects on her life, she acknowledges the end of her roles as wife and mother,

recognizing that her identity is now tied to being “Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (Woolf, 1925). This realization deepens her sense of existential crisis and identity loss.

At the beginning of the 20th century, women’s individuality was undervalued due to the lingering Victorian influences on society (Fleishman, 1975). In the Victorian age, women’s rights and freedoms were heavily restricted by cultural barriers that regulated their status (Fleishman, 1975). Feminist criticism aims to highlight women’s experiences, questioning the representation of women and the traits often deemed “feminine.” Culler (1983) notes that male/female oppositions align with rational/emotional and serious/frivolous distinctions, reinforcing hierarchical views of gender (Culler, 1983). Feminist theory, along with deconstruction, challenges these associations and seeks to dismantle the gender hierarchy that has long existed.

Septimus, another key figure in *Mrs. Dalloway*, is unable to maintain the stoic front expected of him. The war acts as a demon haunting him with visions of death, including hallucinations of his fallen comrade, Evans (Norris, 2009). The trauma of war shatters Septimus’s identity, but those around him fail to empathize with his struggles. His wife, Rezia, cannot understand his behavior, accusing him of cowardice when he speaks of suicide. His doctors dismiss his mental health, warning that it would give his wife an “odd idea of English husbands” (Woolf, 1925), suggesting that he should conform to traditional masculine roles.

Septimus’s mental illness symbolizes the collapse of prewar ideals and the destruction of his identity as a man in post-war English society. Through Septimus, Woolf critiques the ruling class, holding them responsible for the post-World War I trauma and mental chaos. His death marks the end of the conventional notions of England’s superiority, power, and stability, paralleling the personal crises of identity faced by characters like Clarissa.

Both Clarissa and Septimus resist domination and yearn for personal autonomy, though in different ways. Henke (1981) observes that “through his suicide, Septimus communicates with Clarissa, who understands his gesture of defiance against an authoritarian society” (Henke, 1981). Woolf draws a connection between the two characters, using their struggles to critique the rigid societal structures that stifle individuality and personal freedom. Moreover, the character of Sally Seton provides a contrast to Clarissa’s experiences, embodying a more liberated and unconventional approach to gender roles. Sally’s rejection of the conventional societal dictations in the form of repressive norms inspires Clarissa’s already dissatisfied worldview. This encouragement and stirring of Clarissa’s outlook imply Woolf’s own outlook of the biased gender roles which she thinks are nothing more than confining women within the boundaries set by the masculine society. Woolf believes that every social norm and its devised gender role is but a step to curb the prospects of female voice in the society.

Narrative Innovation

Narrative innovations of Virginia Woolf are a dominant feature of *Mrs. Dalloway*, giving it its unique status among the modernist texts. The stream of consciousness technique gives Woolf access to glance at the inner lives of the characters in the novel, and to explore their feelings, emotions, and thoughts, which she records in a nonlinear manner in the form of fragments. The technique of stream of consciousness echoes how the modern world is concerned with the existential realities, and how it negotiates with the problems of subjective and intricacies of man’s existential anxieties.

The novels’ experimental nonlinear storyline, interlacing diverse standpoints and temporal swings, defies the conventional narrative traditions of linearity and chronology of time and place. Woolf subverts the conventional method of linear narration through how she engages with the phenomena of memory and time. Thus, her treatment of time and memory through her

fragmented storytelling style conveys the disjointed and patchy essence of consciousness and reality. These experimentations with the art of novel reflect Woolf's contributions to the themes of modernist concerns, which are focused on existential anxieties of mental health and gender roles alongside the feelings of listlessness and meaninglessness in an apathetic and indifferent masculine world. Moreover, her liberties with the modernist texts in terms of her rebellion against the writing conventions are reflective of her enormous role in eliciting the tendencies of literary experimentation.

Woolf goes around the explicit, and accesses the inner recesses of her characters' consciousness where she can see and scrutinize the complex flow of emotions, sensations, and thoughts with more clarity giving a semblance of originality and first-hand experience. In *The Common Reader* (1925), she writes in her essay *Modern Fiction* that life is far more complex and elusive than we often acknowledge. She argues that when we examine the workings of an ordinary mind on a typical day, we see it absorbing countless impressions—some fleeting, some trivial, and others sharp and vivid. She writes, "life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end." Woolf asserts that it is the novelist's duty to convey this fluctuating and undefined essence of life (McKeon, 2000).

Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* can be understood as an exploration of her own psychological state. Through the characters, she delves into various existential conditions and the underlying causes of human anxiety. Woolf explores the absurdity of the human condition as it evolves historically, reflecting her personal struggles with mental health. Having endured a severe mental breakdown and persistent anxiety, Woolf became preoccupied with depicting that which lies beyond ordinary perception and or realism. Her works often depict the past lingering in the present. She achieves this through the time shifts, she inserts, between the immediate experience signifying the present and memory symbolizing the past, smoothly flowing into the future and back. This treatment of time as a theme—its expansion, contraction, and the unending presence of the past—are one of her central themes Woolf is preoccupied with.

The distinction between "moments of being" and "moments of not-being" are points of focus for Virginia Woolf. These moments, in her view, are vital to human life, and her literary style echoes this focus. By using the stream of consciousness technique, she invites readers to witness the full sensory array of her characters' lives—what they see, taste, smell, hear, and feel. This immersive narrative style gives readers entree into the personal experience of life as it unveils itself. Woolf's writing style helps readers to experience these moments, providing them the prospect to experience what the characters' inner thoughts and feelings.

One of Woolf's primary narrative techniques is the interior monologue, a key element of the stream of consciousness approach. This technique allows for the portrayal of a character's psychological landscape without the intrusion of an external narrator. Woolf uses it subtly, ensuring that the memories and thoughts of her characters resonate without excessive explanation or narrative intervention. As Showalter (2011) observes, Woolf's use of the interior monologue is distinct in its refusal to guide the reader, instead letting the memories speak for themselves (Showalter, 2011).

Through the interior monologue in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf conveys the emotional depth of Clarissa's recollections, particularly those concerning Peter Walsh, whom she once loved but did not marry. Clarissa's decision to marry Richard Dalloway, a man of higher social standing, reflects not only societal pressures but also her inner conflict. The technique also unveils the broader existential struggles of the characters, capturing the uncertainty and malaise that pervaded post-war British society. Woolf masterfully intertwines personal memories with the wider

social and historical context, as demonstrated through Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked soldier suffering from mental illness. Woolf uses Septimus's character to express her scathing criticism of the post-war trauma of World War I. By portraying his mental damage and psychic injury, she gives voice to her condemnation of the failure of English society to counter the aftershocks of the Great War, reflecting the incapability of the nation to meet the challenges of the traumatic damage caused to the soldiers' psyche.

The post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of Septimus can be read as a metaphor for the shared trauma distressing the people at large, alongside a large number of soldiers. Woolf, through her character portrayals, critiques the absurd and futile nature of war. She highlights how irrational soldierly life is, which is obsessed with colonialist strategies of power game for suppression of the weaker nations. His psychological tragedy reflects large-scale embitterment of individuals with the mayhems of war and the British imperialist projects. Septimus suffers from dementia which goes unacknowledged even unnoticed leading him to his *felo-de-se*. Woolf suggests that Septimus's suicide is solely the fallout of societal apathy. Woolf calls it the communal fiasco to not capable of supporting individuals undergoing the horrendous aftereffects of the devastating war.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf intertwines the inner conflicts of the novel's characters and the broad socio-political settings of the post-World War I England. She uses interior monologues, stream of consciousness, and abrupt time swings which enable her to mirror the complex human condition such that it goes beyond the boundaries of the traditional norms of storytelling. She describes the characters of Septimus and Clarissa thoroughly, highlighting the meeting point of societal and personal apprehensions. This approach makes *Mrs. Dalloway* an authentic text giving profound insights into the miserable conditions haunted by existential concerns of gender roles and mental wellbeing in the modern world. Woolf's experimental narrative style challenges the traditional norms of narration giving a subtle and shocking picture of existential dread, mental health, and the haunting impinge of the near and bitter past on the present, making it hellish for those stuck in the aftershocks of the Great War.

Conclusion

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is valued as a landmark text in the literature of modern era due to its exploration of gender roles, and mental health problems in an experimental narrative style. The novel explores these existential themes mirroring the sick aftermaths of World War I on the one hand, and on the other, showcasing Woolf's own internal turmoil due to her dissatisfaction with the existential realities. Using the stream of consciousness narrative technique, Woolf takes the reader on a journey to the inner world of her characters' consciousness, specifically those of Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway. She does so through the interior monologues of Clarissa where she reflects on her identity in present compared to the one she possessed in her past, and her yearning for what she wants in the form of self-fulfillment and unique identity. Once given access to the inner recess of the characters' consciousness, readers can see how the complexities of mental health nourish the torments of anxiety and trauma. Septimus is perpetually haunted by the horrific memories of the Great war long after the war ends. He grapples with the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Woolf's portrayal of Septimus's psychologically unstable condition offers a poignant critique of societal apathy to mental health issues. Likewise, Clarissa's meditations are symbolic of the emotional tax on women imposed by the norms of patriarchal social structure.

Another point of focus in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Woolf's treatment of gender roles. The issue of gender roles in the novel serves as of the oppressive social norms thrust on women during the Victorian and the early modernist period. Clarissa has been given her identity through her gender roles of a mother, wife, and a hostess. Woolf, however, defies these normative roles by exposing

internal yearning of Clarissa for fulfillment and her individual identity that she carried in the past with no label of being a mother or a wife. Woolf portrays the character of Clarissa as a lady struggling to maintain a balance between her public role as “Clarissa Dalloway” and her private identity as only “Clarissa.” This psychological struggle of Clarissa has drawn a lot of interest of the feminist critics who have been critiquing the novel from the perspective of gender dynamics. This allurements for the feminist literary criticism has given *Mrs. Dalloway* the status of a seminal text with a lot of potential for future exploration of the theme. Woolf emphasizes that the inner and silent struggles of women with these issues are a metaphor for the rising sense of disillusionment among the delicate gender regarding the scant opportunities for women growth on social and psychological level. Woolf’s narrative poses existential questions regarding societal demands of conformity to patriarchal structures which are yet to be answered.

Moreover, Woolf’s use of disjointed narration is a revolt against the traditional mode of narration. She moves between time and standpoints demonstrating her revolt against the linear mode of storytelling. This tactic shows fluidity and movement of the processes of human consciousness. This novel method of narration indicates Woolf’s effort to shoot the intricate experiences of the characters while also conforming to the modernist way of storytelling. Woolf lives in moments and hence focusses on highlighting “moments of being.” Dealing with the phases of the past and future through the present, Woolf emphasizes the way identity is molded by the joint power of memory, time, and consciousness.

Finally, *Mrs. Dalloway*, due to its holistic and multifaceted study of the personal and shared experiences of its characters, exerts a significant influence on the modernist texts. The existential worries of Woolf and her innovative storytelling expand the horizon of the novel as a genre through its nuanced analysis of gender roles, mental wellbeing issues, and the pursuit of meaning in the modern world that is chaotic. Thus, she enlarges the scope of the modernist literature through her novelistic approach to and her open revolt against the conventions of narration as well as laying the basics for psychological and feminist literary scholarship that have yet to come. Woolf, though her innovative narrative style, allows readers to peek into the complexities of human condition, giving *Mrs. Dalloway* a lasting label of a voyage into human consciousness to witness and understand both societal and personal struggles.

Recommendations

Future research could further explore the intersections of mental health and narrative techniques in modernist literature, examining how other authors address psychological themes using experimental forms. Additionally, scholars could investigate the impact of Woolf’s narrative innovations on subsequent literary movements and their relevance to contemporary feminist and psychological criticism. Further studies might also analyze the influence of historical and cultural contexts on the representation of gender and mental health in modernist texts.

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