

Amala Poli // Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* is a modernist text that captures the preoccupations of Woolf's time. It also draws a timeless mindscape of an individual suffering from mental illness: the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Warren Smith. This article explores some strands specific to the character and the texts that discuss Woolf's work on writing madness into the text of *Mrs Dalloway*. The reader moves through shifting strands from Clarissa Dalloway's world to that of Septimus Warren Smith's, from coherence to chaos in navigating these two narratives. Of these intersecting voices, the inner world of Septimus Warren Smith places the reader in a voyeur-like capacity, as the nature of Septimus's thoughts are at odds with the rest of his world.

When Septimus is first introduced in the text, we see him in the midst of people gathered in Bond Street. In studying the different voices in *Mrs Dalloway*, Johanna Garvey sees in London an implication of the modern present and its isolation in the text, reflected in the physical aspect of England's setting as an island, and the timeline of the novel which together render it with a sense of "impending doom, of shaky foundations, a modern uneasiness and malaise" (Garvey 63). This uneasiness is most palpable in the narrative thread that follows Septimus and his young wife, Lucrezia. Woolf approaches the first stark dissonance in the text at a moment in Bond Street when the whole populace pauses and looks up at the sky in unison, to stare at an airplane that starts spelling out the word "TOFFEE" in the sky. In the unanimity of the gaze directed at the word in the sky, we have an ironical and false sense of a common spirit and solidarity among the crowds of London, betrayed by the incoherence and jarring dissonance of Septimus's thoughts, as he talks out loud about killing himself. (Woolf 14)

"But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement" (Woolf 21). In reading Septimus' thoughts, the reader occupies a spectator-voyeur duality, sharing his insights about human nature and the world, while also inhabiting the loss of unity with the rest of the world that he experiences. The reader has sole access to this inner world, and the craft of the writing allows for the reader to be complicit in the insufficiency of attentions received by Septimus, which is accomplished through the narrative shifts and jumps across characters.

"For he was not ill. Dr. Holmes said there was nothing the matter with him" (Woolf 21). The general practitioner's pronouncement about Septimus' apparent wellness continues to be a strand of certainty that Lucrezia Smith returns to in moments of desperation, as his condition worsens through the novel. Seeking a second opinion, she is told that Septimus is quite seriously ill by a

Broad Street specialist, Dr. Bradshaw, and is recommended to a home for rest. Woolf creates in Bradshaw a critique of humanity's failure in saving Septimus Warren Smith. "He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up," states the unequivocal description of Bradshaw regarding his success with his patients (Woolf 94). Scholar Francis Gillen comments on the abstractionism that is characteristic of Bradshaw. Gillen sees the "nobody lives for himself alone" treatment maxim of Bradshaw's approach to pulling patients out of their self-destructive and depressive plunges as being problematic in its misguided application (Woolf 91); Bradshaw treated his patients as manifest symptoms from a psychology textbook, instead of seeing them as individual sufferers (Gillen 488). We see how Septimus occupies a milieu quite hostile to his thoughts and needs, despite the commonality of post-war trauma in survivors. The paradoxical nature of the co-existence of the characters, in close proximity and yet so distant in their knowledge of each others' experiences as well as their social stations, is mirrored within the novel in the juxtaposition of Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts. In fact, the first crisscrossing of these two narrative threads occurs when Clarissa Dalloway hears of Septimus' suicide at her party, which is immediately followed by her disbelief at the entrance of such unpleasantness during her successful evening (Woolf 169).

Woolf's harshest critique of the social order is the moment in the text when Peter Walsh looks up to see an ambulance speeding by. "One of the triumphs of civilization, Peter Walsh thought" (Woolf 139). This sentence follows the death of Septimus Warren Smith. The text captures the irony of Walsh's observation, as the systemic and social failure carries Septimus away in the ambulance that Walsh finds worthy of admiration. The missing empathy and compassion of the milieu is emphasized by Woolf through the doubts of Lucrezia Smith, the resistances of Septimus, and Woolf's character portrayals of the medical professionals. The writing of illness and care are positioned along this axis, where efforts made in the context are quite insufficient in understanding the illness. Woolf's construction of Septimus Warren Smith, as a man with insights, conflicts, diverse sensations and opinions, is a complex portrayal of a struggle with post war trauma, and an insufficiency of care and compassion.

Works Cited

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