

## Uncompromising Worldviews of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf'un *Mrs. Dalloway* Adlı Romanında Clarissa Dalloway ve Septimus Smith'in  
Uzlaşmyan Dünya Görüşleri

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### Abstract

Virginia Woolf who is one of the dominant authors of the 1900s prefers to deal with the individual, self and the problems of gender issues as opposed to the established norms of the Victorian orthodoxy which puts forward the social welfare and the females under suppression. In her novels, while Woolf is writing about the lack of communication among people, especially between men and women, she creates masculine and feminine visions of life. By creating such visions, Woolf concentrates on the frustrations, disillusionments and disappointments of the individuals with society which neglects the psychological and social needs of them. In general, the females are represented as the intellectual and independent women of her time whereas males are personalized weaker and more sensitive than women to put emphasis on the human side of the individuals as opposed to social obligations imposed on them. Within this scope, the major aim of this paper is to analyse the uncompromising worldviews of Clarissa and Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus Smith, Clarissa Dalloway, Gender

### Öz

Virginia Woolf, toplumsal yararı ve kadınları baskı altında tutan Victoria dönemi muhafazakarlığına karşı olarak, bireyi, benliği ve cinsiyet problemlerini ele alan, 1900'lerin önemli yazarlarından birisidir. Woolf bireyler, özellikle kadın ve erkek arasındaki iletişim eksikliği hakkında yazarak, kadın ve erkeklerin hayata bakış açılarını irdeler. Woolf bu farklı bakış açılarını yaratarak; toplumun, psikolojik ve sosyal ihtiyaçlarını yok saydığı bireyin, hayal kırıklıkları, hüsrancı ve ümitsizlikleri üzerine yoğunlaşır. Genel olarak kadınları zamanının entellektüel ve bağımsız kadınları olarak yansıtırken, erkekleri, bireyin insan tarafına vurgu yapılması açısından, kadınlardan daha zayıf, daha hassas olarak anlatır. Bu bakış açısıyla, makalenin asıl amacı Virginia Woolf'un Mrs Dalloway adlı romanında Clarissa ve Septimus Smith'in ödü vermeyen dünya bakış açısını analiz etmektir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus Smith, Clarissa, Cinsiyet Ayrımı

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Virginia Woolf's own unfortunate life which included sexual abuse in childhood by her half-brothers, a lifelong struggle with depression and suicide has always caused her readers' attention to turn to her as well as her fiction. Being the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, who was an author and editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and being the wife of Leonard Woolf, who was a well-known writer, she was closely involved with the literature of the time. She played an important role in the formation of the Bloomsbury Group of writers, artists and intellectuals who opposed Victorian orthodoxy and promoted a modern culture.

In her fiction, she deals with lack of communication among people, especially between men and women, and creates masculine and feminine visions of life. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith are the representatives of these visions. Mrs. Dalloway manages to bring harmony into her life while Septimus Smith finds freedom in death. Though they have parallelisms in their lives, their visions lead them to different ways. As David Dowling observes,

Clarissa and Septimus share many personal qualities. While choosing extreme examples of sexual roles, the soldier and the hostess, Woolf shows Septimus to be sensitive, imaginative, and emotional, happy to be at home with his wife, who is the breadwinner, while Clarissa is shown to be a fighter and a thinker as well as a wife and mother. (1991, p. 78)

In relation to their having almost contrary drives in their lives, Septimus's suicide can be interpreted as a refusal to the recovery process of post-war traumas which perpetually affected the social, political, economic and private spheres of life whereas Clarissa "rejects the closure and definiteness of an essentialist understanding of identity" (García, 2010, p. 17) by clinging to life through "silenc[ing] Septimus and rob[bing] his death of meaning" (DeMeester, 1998, p. 663) as a refusal to gloomy continuum.

In the first pages of the novel, some important details about Clarissa are given, which enable us to understand her consciousness and her thoughts: "she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness" (1989, p. 5). She is a very complex character who "[feels] very young; at the same time unspeakably aged" (1989, p. 9). She is also a very intellectual woman whose favourite reading is "Huxley, Tyndall and Shakespeare" (1989, p. 69). She is an independent woman who preferred to marry Richard Dalloway instead of Peter Walsh, her former lover, because:

. . . in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; Which Richard gave her, and she him. (Where was he this morning, for instance? Some committee, she never asked what.) But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable. . . . (1989, p. 9)

Being both an intellectual and an independent woman of her time, it is impossible for her to be the wife of a man like Peter Walsh, who wants total surrender to love, which threatens her sense of privacy. Her need for independence and freedom has led her to marry a real English Gentleman, Richard Dalloway, who is a member of the Parliament in the Conservative government. This marriage brings her a status and authority in society which allows her to live according to her needs and wishes. It also enables her to keep her privacy of the soul. It is obvious that "she [has] a clear notion of what she [wants]" (1989, p. 68). As Peter Walsh observes, "the obvious thing to say about of her [is] that she [is] worldly; care[s] too much for the rank and society and getting on in the world" (1989, p. 68). Even the title of the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, emphasizes "the social radiance and centrality of its heroine" (Dowling, 1991, p. 82).

On the other hand, Septimus Warren Smith, the counterpart of the female vision of Mrs. Daloway, is quite different from her. Unlike her, he has experienced the most difficult times. When World War I was declared, he was one of the first to volunteer. But, he has returned mentally injured and refused to be cured. He accuses British society of being indifferent to the soldiers who have fought for their country. He defines war as “the little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder” (1989, p. 86). “He [has] served with the greatest distinction” (1989, p. 86), but he has returned home with an upset mental balance after having experienced traumatic events in the war, like the loss of his close friend Evans. Suffering from shell-shock, he is unable to convey what he thinks and articulates in a clear and comprehensible way (García, 2010, p. 19).

Septimus can be seen as a representative of the victims of war who have experienced all the difficulties of war and cannot adapt themselves to normal social life. He represents those soldiers who have fought for the sake of nationalism and lost all their ideals after ‘the war. He is disappointed with society which neglects the psychological and social needs of soldiers. For him, “the world has raised its whip” (Woolf, 1989, p. 15) and he does not really know where it descends. He is so much offended by the indifference of the society that his marriage to an Italian girl, Lucrezia, might be considered as a kind of revenge. At the rare times when he can think rationally, he cannot understand “how he [has] married his wife without loving her” (Woolf, 1989, p. 82). That is why, his unhappy and unsatisfactory marriage cannot rescue him from the feeling of loneliness and the effects of war. He feels tired and isolated but he does not complain about this isolation as he thinks:

. . . now he was quite alone, condemned, deserted, as those who are about to die are alone, there was a luxury in it, an isolation full of sublimity; a freedom which the attached can never know. (Woolf, 1989, p. 83)

Septimus tries to preserve the privacy of his soul and finally finds this privacy in death. He imagines that “the whole world [is] clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes” (Woolf, 1989, p. 83). When he is depressed, he thinks of death, isolation, and war. But, when he feels peaceful, he questions death and asks himself “why should he kill for their sakes? Food [is] pleasant; the sun hot . . .” (Woolf, 1989, p. 83). At those peaceful times, he becomes aware of the details of life which he enjoys. He even helps his wife in making decorations on hats. But his chaotic feelings cause confusion and inner struggle.

His chaotic feelings also point to the major difference between Clarissa and him; she is able to find peace in her life whereas Septimus cannot escape from the memories of war and chaos. Clarissa’s life is the exemplification of order and peace. It is an attempt to overcome human weakness and chaos whereas Septimus’ life represents weakness and chaos. However, still there is a connection between Clarissa and Septimus. They are the two sides of a manic-depressive disease: while Clarissa is manic, Septimus is depressive. Through their mental diseases, they show two different states of mind to emphasize the fact that people form their own visions of life to preserve their privacies. Showing life from different perspectives is a theme that runs through most of Virginia Woolf’s works. As Daniel Schwarz explains: “For Woolf, no theme could be more urgent. The novel enables her to examine attitudes and states of mind [from different visions] that are crucial to her experience” (1995, p. 205).

Both Clarissa and Septimus share the same destiny. The symptoms of their diseases have begun after having lost the most important person in their lives. Thus, death plays an important role in their visions of life. Clarissa has lost her security in her childhood after the death of her sister Sylvia, who

was killed by a tree that fell on her. This is the greatest agony in her life which always makes her feel “the emptiness about the heart of life” (Woolf, 1989, p. 29) and leads her to create a private world in which she feels secure and safe from the harshness of the outside world. She finds this peaceful atmosphere in her attic room at home. Knowing her manic state of mind, her husband Richard allows her to be there to regain her confidence to cope with the difficulties of life and to attend her social activities again. Thus, her attic is a kind of sacred place of seclusion in which she finds relief.

Unlike Mrs. Dalloway, Septimus Smith cannot find a way to regain his sanity after losing his dearest friend Evans in the war. He has witnessed the death of Evans and cannot cope with this tragic event. In his depressive mood, he creates shapes which constantly remind him of this death and Evans in different situations. Once he sees

[a] man in gray was actually walking towards them. It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed. I must tell the whole world, Septimus cried, raising his hand (as the dead man in the gray suit came nearer), raising his hand like some colossal figure who has lamented the fate of man for ages in the desert alone with his hands pressed to his forehead, furrows of despair on his cheeks, and now sees light on the desert's edge which broadens and strikes the iron-black figure. . . . (Woolf, 1989, p. 63)

It is such a tightly woven friendship that he cannot forget the things which he has shared with Evans. His memories do not allow him to lead a peaceful life after his friend's death. He has never thought that “there was the end of [this] friendship” (Woolf, 1989, p. 78). He feels guilty of being alive and thinks that “he [is] bound to survive” (Woolf, 1989, p. 78) and bound to feel “this eternal suffering, and eternal loneliness” (Woolf, 1989, p. 24) which he does not want. Unlike Clarissa, he is in need of medical help. When the nerve specialist, Mr. Bradshaw wants him to be cured in “a beautiful house in the country . . . in solitude without friends, without books, without messages for six months” (Woolf, 1989, pp.87-89) and away from his wife, Septimus feels that his privacy, which he wants to preserve, is completely shattered. His wife Lucrezia, having female sensitivity, does not let him be cured away from her. Septimus does not have an attic room in which he finds freedom and security. His privacy of soul is too much violated by the intrusion of the people outside and he becomes totally indifferent to the outer world.

As Daniel Schwarz observes “there is a thin line which divides sanity and madness, . . . love and hate, isolation and participation in the community, communication and incoherence, form and chaos” (1998, p. 278), Clarissa manages to find different ways to preserve her sanity. One of the most important ways is to have a peaceful family life in which she finds security. When she feels safe from the harshness of the outside world, she finds herself courageous enough to show her feminine vision which is “gentle and generous-hearted” (Woolf, 1989, p. 7). In her isolation, she does not forget the instinct of motherhood and adores her daughter Elizabeth, who is a seventeen-year-old young girl. Her love for her daughter Elizabeth is so great that she sees her as one of her possessions. When she introduces Elizabeth to Peter Walsh, she calls her “my Elizabeth”, not my daughter or simply Elizabeth. Even Peter finds this introduction odd and cannot give a meaning to it. But, he does not know that it is her love for Elizabeth which rescues Clarissa from insanity. Thus, Elizabeth is her strong tie with social life. But, in her manic depressive states, she does not want to share her daughter's possession with any other person, even with her history tutor Miss Kilman. She is jealous of Miss

Kilman's intimacy with "her" Elizabeth and thinks that Miss Kilman has stolen Elizabeth from her: "This a Christian- this woman! This woman had taken her daughter from her! She in touch with invisible presences! Heavy, ugly, commonplace, without kindness or grace, she now the meaning of life!" (Woolf, 1989, p. 111). Thus, the idea of losing Elizabeth drives her into a manic depressive state and sometimes she becomes totally impersonal and denies the reality of the outside world. She thinks "for no doubt with another throw of the dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No" (Woolf, 1989, p. 13). For Clarissa, Elizabeth is a vehicle which enables her to be in contact with society.

On the other hand, Septimus, representing the male vision of life, refuses to find a way to communicate with the society which he really hates. He does not even dare to have a child in this world. He thinks:

One cannot bring children into a world like this! One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now in this way, now that. (Woolf, 1989, p. 80)

He has closed his private inner world to the outer world: "he [looks] at people outside; happy they [seem], collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But, he [cannot] taste, he [cannot] feel." (Woolf, 1989, p. 79) He sees "world, itself, without meaning" (Woolf, 1989, p. 79). He does not like the big cities which force people to communicate and dissolve the privacy of the mind. He thinks:

London [has] swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith; thought nothing of fantastic Christian names like Septimus with which their parents have thought to distinguish them. (Woolf, 1989, p. 76)

He sees London as the cause of his loneliness and isolation. To Clarissa, however, London symbolizes freedom, joy and life itself. She loves London life and likes dancing and horse riding when she is in a healthy state of mind. Her feminine vision of life helps her to find a way to be away from the stress of the world. She is capable of putting away all the shortcomings of life and sees its beauty on a morning in June. In her healthy states, she realizes that she lacks something essential in her life: "It [is] something warm which [breaks] up surfaces and [ripples] the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together" (Woolf, 1989, p. 46) and tries to fill this gap by giving parties at her home. For her,

giving parties provides the possibility of unity her personal life lacks. She requires the admiration of others to complete her: "How much she wanted it – that people should look pleased as she came in" (13). (Schwarz, 1995, p. 266)

She deals with every single detail herself as if she were an artist who is painting on her canvas. Her parties "are rituals where her immortalizing process might happen, where people might spread themselves among other people, to wave themselves into the enduring fabric. . . . Clarissa articulates a mystical theory of pattern and connection" (Dowling, 79). That is why she wants to buy the flowers for the party herself. On the way to the shops, she feels free and enjoys London life. She sees the flight of an aeroplane which "advertises . . . toffee" (20). It is an incident which brings different people together although they do not know each other. Even though Clarissa and Septimus never meet each other all through the novel, they are under the same sky watching the aeroplane. Septimus watches

it with great delight as it reminds him of his past memories. Thus, it means that people, though they have no acquaintance with each other, may have something in common to share. Clarissa enjoys life in London and forgets her fear of death and loneliness while she is preparing for her party. She recalls some lines of poetry which express her mood:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun  
nor the furious winter's rages. (Woolf, 1989, p. 10)

This party enables her to deal with the things outside herself. She manages to break the barriers that separate her from the people. The party also enables Virginia Woolf to bring all the characters under the same roof. Mr. Bradshaw announces the death of Septimus at the party. When Clarissa hears the death of this man whom she does not know, she sympathises with him as she shares the same feeling of duality of death and life. She chooses to enjoy life as much as life and her state of mind permit. She has achieved contact with reality that has eluded her at her party.

As a conclusion, it would not be wrong to state that;

For Woolf, the world is the theatre of "free play" in which beauty is scattered and tossed to the winds and society is but a fortuitous, haphazard collection of so-and-so in Kensington, so-and-so in Mayfair. She feels, like Clarissa, that this dispersed spectacle of life can and should be collected and assembled and created into new, more human forms. (Bloom, 1988, p. 67)

In a way, Woolf primarily incorporates the "divided experiences of different characters" (Colesworthy, 2014, p. 172) like Clarissa and Septimus into the narrative in a comparative manner. Thus, one could comprehend the creation of self and the worldviews of two different genders during the early-twentieth-century Britain.

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