

Extended Essay English Literature

**Revealing Class Difference in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway by contrasting Clarissa
and Septimus**

**To what extent does Virginia Woolf expose class divisions in post–World War I London
through the contrasting experiences of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith
in Mrs. Dalloway?**

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Introduction:

Influence of World War I:

Virginia Woolf examines the class differences, socio-cultural construction, and inter-class intransigence in post-war London in her novel *"Mrs. Dalloway"* which was published in 1925. The First World War had negative effects on the psychological state and quality of life of many people in England. Moreover, it intensified the class differences between the upper classes and working classes. This was mainly because participating in the war was not compulsory for wealthy people. For this reason, Woolf critiques the social systems that protect upper class privilege while simultaneously marginalize those from lower socioeconomic classes. Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* explores the psychological and social fractures left by the war, revealing a society struggling to redefine identity, class, and stability. This essay elaborates on modernist narrative techniques Woolf employs to expose the class divisions of this period through the parallel experiences of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. By analyzing how Woolf blends interior monologue, flashback technique, and shifting perspectives, this essay argues that the novel's structure itself becomes a critique of post-war social hierarchy. Additionally, in this novel, Woolf uses the flashback technique to reveal what the characters experienced and felt in the past. In addition, she was one of the first writers who used the interior monologue technique. In this novel, a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a fictional upper-class woman in post-World War I England, is depicted. This essay analyses Virginia Woolf's novel *"Mrs. Dalloway"* (1925), and answers the question ***"To what extent does Virginia Woolf expose class divisions in post-World War I London through the contrasting experiences of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith in Mrs. Dalloway?"***

This extended essay will follow four steps highlighted below. First, the social and cultural impact of the World War I on the novel's setting will be examined. Second character analysis will be done because the class differences in the novel is revealed over Clarissa and Septimus.

Third the main themes “death” and “privacy” will be discussed in order to show how the socio-cultural effects of the war are reflected in the text. Finally, Woolf’s modernist narrative techniques (stream of consciousness, flashback, free indirect speech) will be briefly analyzed and how these techniques make class differences visible will be explained. In this essay as a primary source the Virginia Woolf’s novel named “*Mrs. Dalloway*”, and the Emel Zorluoğlu’s “A Critique of Social System in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*” essay will be used as a secondary source.

Main Body:

After World War I Period:

The First World War deeply affected Britain socially, culturally, and economically. As a result of many men going to the front during the war in England, a large part of the industrial and factory work was left to the women. As a result, the war disrupted the traditional class hierarchies, reshaped gender roles, and had a traumatic impact both on the veterans and the public in general. In this novel, Virginia Woolf outlines this situation through two main characters Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus, who never meet each other. In addition, there are several secondary characters from different socioeconomic backgrounds that are used to mirror or contrast the social realities of the period. Overall, Woolf situates her characters within a society negotiating death in the aftermath of war. Moreover, Woolf’s characters struggle with the invasion of their privacy within that period through social practices, to which heightened importance is attached in order to preserve an appearance of normalcy after the war. These conflicts are depicted mainly in Clarissa’s and Septimus’s interior world as well as their world views.

The Character Analysis:

Clarissa Dalloway:

Many people are dissatisfied with their own lives because they see themselves overshadowed- even oppressed by the other people's judgments. Over time, people begin to lose their own thoughts and identities. This situation is emphasized in Virginia Woolf's novel "*Mrs. Dalloway*" with the character Clarissa Dalloway. In the novel, Clarissa is a well-off housewife who is married to Richard (a Member of Parliament). Before she came to London, she lived in Bourton. She represents the upper class in the post-war period. Her life revolved around her ritualized parties. For her, parties are not simply for entertainment; they also represent social order by "knitting together" influential people and protecting class boundaries. At the beginning of the novel, Clarissa goes to buy some flowers for her party, so she starts to walk in London streets. As she walks, she thought about many things, some of which were mostly life and death, and the fact that she had married Richard instead of Peter Walsh, which affected her whole life. This decision makes her feel mainly like "Mrs. Richard Dalloway" so it reshapes her identity. It is also seen that she questions aging and death so much, even when she is doing as small as buying flowers. In this way Woolf reveals the cracks in Clarissa's identity, and outlines Clarissa's relationship with mortality and her fear of death. She thinks about her youth, especially what they experienced with Sally Seton, and she considers whether her marriage was, in the end, an act of conformity to wealth.

Septimus Warren Smith:

Wars can cause intense social, cultural and psychological harm, particularly for the people who are involved. Even for the victors, war generates its own set of problems. After World War I all the countries that were involved in the war were affected economically, but it also affected the British veterans in their daily life. This can be seen in Virginia Woolf's novel "*Mrs. Dalloway*" through the character Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus was involved in World War I as a soldier. After the war he began to live in his internal world and began to experience hallucinations in daily life. The war affected him deeply because he lost his friend Evans, he began to have conversations with his hallucinations. So, his wife took him to a psychiatrist, and he was diagnosed with "Shell Shock" (what would today be called PTSD). This condition ultimately led to his death. Septimus symbolizes the marginalized class. With little social capital, Smith was treated as insignificant by his milieu—except by his wife. His trauma was ignored and seen as a weakness by his surroundings. Septimus' life emphasizes how the war intensifies the class differences: while Clarissa's surroundings were privileged, people like Septimus were excluded by society.

Literary Analysis:

Themes:

The novel depicts the difficulty of maintaining privacy in a society governed by rigid social norms and appearances. This theme is examined through the conflict of communication and privacy. One example is the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway, who is trying to maintain her private autonomy despite social expectations. As a result of her social popularity, Clarissa frequently hosts parties, believing that such events will help her feel connected to others. Yet, these parties fail to provide the ultimate intimacy that she desperately seeks. "She had the oddest

sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them.”(Woolf 10) She does not feel comfortable with the people she invites; hosting actually makes her anxious, but she continues to organize parties to please herself and others. Moreover, her parties symbolize the continuity of upper-class rituals. “Mrs. Dalloway is always giving parties to cover the silence.” (Woolf 67) She hosted parties even though she does not feel comfortable with it because she does not want to be alone. Also, her feeling of loneliness makes her do things she does not like to which makes her question her decisions about her life.

Clarissa is not the only one who felt stuck within the socially prescribed roles, though. Privacy of Septimus, who is her lower class equal, also has been invaded by the society and the doctors. Especially his mental privacy was deemed insignificant by his psychologist Holmes who thinks “there was nothing whatever the matter” (Woolf 89). That is to say, Holmes believes that Septimus is just exaggerating his memories of the war. All these indicate that Holmes, and the whole society in this respect, underestimate his feelings. For Septimus’s story, Holmes reveals the society's excessive expectations of someone who has just had a life-changing trauma. Similarly, his wife forced him to be social, but he failed to find company to unburden himself since he believes that no one would be able to get a grasp of his state of mind unless they witness the terrors of a battlefield. This is why Septimus feels unheard, as if he is left alone with his painful memories. It can also be stated that his privacy is forced because no one acknowledges his trauma despite his desperate efforts to explain himself. Even, society expects him to act normally whereas his inner world is collapsed. So, his trauma is tried to be paved over.

For both Clarissa and Septimus, the notion of privacy emerges as deep internal solitude and a persistent inability to communicate. In fact, the choice of Clarissa, an upper-class hostess,

and Septimus, a traumatized war veteran, as the two main focal points of the novel signals the division of British society in the aftermath of the war. Together, these two characters reveal that the devastating effects of the war have reached to the each and every segment of the society regardless of their class. Clarissa's party organizations, despite her shattered inner world, imply the fragile condition of the upper class because, like Clarissa herself, society is in fact fragmented and lacks genuine connections, even though it appears stable and well-functioning. Septimus, on the other hand, is presented as a war veteran who has sacrificed everything for the country and yet received nothing but condescending advice and exclusion in return. The reason why the doctors refuse to acknowledge the gravity of his mental status can be interpreted as a symbol of the doctors' class-based discrimination. As representatives of upper and professional classes, the doctor's priorities social order and recognition over Septimus's lived experience. Therefore, they treated him not as a patient but as a social inconvenience who fails to follow the social norms and conventions. "Dr. Holmes had perhaps called, ran down to prevent him coming He could see her, like a little hen, with her wings spread barring his passage. But Holmes persevered." (Woolf 130) These lines show how their persistence in propriety, restraint, and social order takes precedence over genuine care, revealing how authority marginalizes those who no longer fit the societal ideals. Moreover, a well-known London psychiatrist, Sir William Bradshaw informs him that "[They] have been arranging that [he] should go into a home" (Woolf 112). This reflects how they discard Septimus since he fails to follow what has been asked of him. It can be signaling how the lower and working classes are silenced and dismissed as soon as they stop complying with the social order. Thus, it can clearly be seen that although Clarissa and Septimus inhabit different social worlds, both characters experience an isolation that social expectations only intensify. Even though they do not meet even once in the novel, they are each other's thematic mirrors. They reflect the social class divisions of the post-war era. Clarissa reflects the superficial stability of the upper class, while Septimus reflects the

psychological collapse of the war veterans, lower class. Together, they reveal how war trauma manifests itself differently across all social classes.

Death is another prevalent theme of the novel, and the characters' reflections on death strongly reflect their social class. For example, Clarissa contemplates death as if it were a romanticized private experience, which she entertains from time to time. From the very beginning of the novel, she finds herself carried away while observing the daily lives of people on the way to the flower shop and acknowledges the fact that she has always been an observant of people's constantly moving lives as follows: "She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. Not that she thought herself clever, or much out of the ordinary" (Woolf 29) these lines reveal Clarissa's emotional isolation from the people around her since she imagines being 'far out to the sea and alone' even though she is in the center of the city. So, it can be argued that she finds it difficult to bond with others. Also, Clarissa says that living is "dangerous" and it shows that she does not only feel alone but also feels unsafe. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that her train of thoughts led her to find consolation in death itself. She goes on to contemplate over whether or not it matters if she was to cease completely and figures that "all things must go on without her" (Woolf 28). It can be interpreted from that scene that Clarissa thinks her death would have make no difference in people's lives. She believes they would keep organizing social gatherings and tea parties as they have always done. It is important to hear such ideas from an upper-class woman like Clarissa, because as the popular figure of the London society at the time, it would be expected of her to have a significant position that is essential for the functioning of the society. Yet, her supposition proves otherwise. Clarissa believes that there would always be a hostess to hold successful organizations, and many guests to participate them. Thus, it can be concluded that Clarissa's inquiry of death is not about the death itself in its true form, but it is about her death within the

society. She ponders on her position in the society itself and what would happen if she was to stop fulfilling her prescribed duties as a hostess; therefore, finds herself socially 'dead'. That is to say, she does not consider death a reality. She approaches it rather as a romanticized fantasy that might offer her an escape from the social pressure she feels overwhelmed by.

In contrast, as a member of the lower middle class, Septimus experiences death as a lived reality rather than a distant fantasy, having confronted it firsthand in war. His working-class background gains him a position in the military service and makes him disposable both during and after the war. It is seen that Septimus manages to reach a higher position within the society only when he decides to put his life at risk during the war. Yet, after the war, once he can't remain productive and emotionally controlled, his suffering is approached as a medical condition rather than genuinely understood. Consequently, he is returned to his primary lower-class status. It can be deduced that a working-class member like Septimus is only valued as long as he meets the expectations. His suicidal thoughts, therefore, do not only stem from trauma, but also from his awareness that his life does not and will never have a social value.

Particularly after the loss of his beloved friend Evans, death becomes the main reason for his trauma as well as an opportunity to escape from the harsh reality of his life. "There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself "For God's sake don't come!" Septimus cried out. For he could not look upon the dead. But the branches parted." (Woolf 87) Septimus's hallucinations of Evans suggest that the dead and the death inhabit his mental world. Moreover, Septimus is not afraid of seeing Evans; on the contrary, he is even thrilled by these visions. It can be taken as a signal of his acquaintance with the world of the dead. That is, he has normalized and internalized death. The psychological trauma he had experienced and the society's refusal to accept the lasting effects of war on veterans combined to result in his continuous reflection on death and subsequent internalization of it as suggested by the line, "He had been dead, and yet he lived." (Woolf 95) This paradox reveals his emotional

disconnection from life, even though he was alive on the surface. His exposure to violence has collapsed the boundary between the livings and dying, leaving him psychologically suspended between the two states. Even though he survived, his survival is merely physical while his trauma extinguishes him from the inside. Furthermore, the haunting memories from the war torture him constantly and attach him to the violence and death. Also, the doctors' neglecting to acknowledge Septimus's sufferings intensifies his mental condition. He does not feel like the society is understanding what he has been through actually. In other words, like Clarissa, he feels essentially misunderstood. Over time, he absorbs death into his identity.

To accomplish, death is a class reflective theme in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa and Septimus engage with it in fundamentally different ways, affected by their contrasting social positions. While Clarissa approaches it in a more philosophical way and tackle the issue with regards to intrapersonal connections, Septimus experiences it as a solid reality and a literal escape from social oppression. For Clarissa, thought of death is just a fantasy, and an odd thing, but for Septimus it is a daily life that he internalizes. Neither of them feels understood by the society because the society thinks that Clarissa organizes parties only for having fun; they do not realize that she hosts parties, so she does not feel lonely. Similarly, Septimus's cry for help is underestimated and only regarded as a mental problem by the doctors. As a result, even though they come from different social backgrounds, their disconnection from society caused by the immediate need to fit in the social expectations leads them to have suicidal thoughts. In contrast, as a member of the lower middle class, Septimus experiences death as a lived reality rather than a distant fantasy, having confronted it firsthand in war.

Conclusion:

The WWI disrupted the traditional class hierarchies and had a traumatic impact both on the veterans and the public in general. The difficulty in protecting privacy with the rigid social norms of the London society amidst the trauma of the war is tackled through two main characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa and Septimus.

The novel depicts the erosion of personal privacy under the pressure of inflexible social norms. Clarissa reflects her willingness to conform to the social norms by throwing parties despite they induce anxiety in her. She tries to preserve upper class rituals by masking her loneliness through such crowded social gatherings. Similarly, privacy of Septimus, especially his mental privacy, is invaded by the society and the doctors as his trauma is deemed unimportant.

Reflections on death also highlight the role of social class. Clarissa is an upper class, who is protected by her social position. She considers it as an abstract concept that offers emotional escape from her social responsibilities. In contrast, Septimus views death as an immediate and unavoidable. Realizing that his worth depends on social compliance, he becomes aware of his limited place within the society and is drawn towards suicidal thoughts. Ultimately, Woolf shows how class shapes whether death is an idea or an endured necessity.

In that regard, Woolf exposes class divisions in postwar London to a significant extent by revealing how social positions shape the borders of privacy and give recognition insofar as individuals comply with societal expectations.

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