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“In the Sea of Sentiments”

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EXTENDED ESSAY

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Research Question: How does Virginia Woolf question the relationship between life and death in *Mrs Dalloway* through the characters of Septimus Warren Smith and Clarissa Dalloway?

ABSTRACT

In the book of *Mrs. Dalloway* written by Virginia Woolf, the inner selves and social relationships of Londoners after the First World War are explained. As the most important effect of the war is the panic of death and questioning self-existence, the relationship between life and death is discussed through the most obsessed characters who are Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith with respect to the research question:

“How does Virginia Woolf question the relationship between life and death in *Mrs Dalloway* through the characters of Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway?”

This question has needed addressing two major characters, the background of the novel and the style that is used. This extended essay is developed in two sections: The first part explores the effect of style on reflection of death throughout the novel. The mainly visible techniques that are used in the novel are allegory, oxymoron, hyperbole, and stream of consciousness. The second part explains the characters with their personalities and notions of life and death. These notions are explained in a detailed way concerning on joy of living, fear of death and accepting death with the effect of a common habit of these two characters. In the end the analysis concludes that worrying about the facts we cannot change is meaningless while emphasizing the importance of the end of the novel.

During investigation process this literary analysis is supported by secondary sources about the life of the Englishman, their cultural and religion structure and psychological problems of the characters. The sources that are mentioned in the essay except the primary source (novel) are shown in bibliography page.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	4
I. SETTING OF THE NOVEL	4
II. DEATH AND SUICIDE	4
MRS DALLOWAY: MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH.....	6
I. STYLE AND STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS.....	6
II. CONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTERS THROUGH DEATH	7
i. <i>Getting Into Characters</i>	7
ii. <i>Life against Death</i>	9
iii. <i>Source of Fear</i>	10
iv. <i>Reflection of Death through Literature</i>	13
v. <i>Accepting Death</i>	14
CONCLUSION.....	16
BIBLIOGRAPHY	17

INTRODUCTION

This literary analysis, aims to explore the conflict of life and death on human life by focusing on the two of the major characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith which is explored through looking at and Woolf's style. Since this concept is the biggest trauma of the First World War, it is significant to understand the people who lived in those times Therefore, this essay may raise awareness about both human psychology and the damages of wars.

I. Setting of the Novel

Mrs Dalloway is a novel which is set in after First World War (WWI) when the protagonist throws a party. The post-war atmosphere makes people conscious; worry about the shortness of life, and coming of death. After such terror, people (at least most of them) go back to their life and this simplicity directs them to question their own existence, and the meaning of life. Certainly this horror cannot remove emotions but make them stronger especially, for the ones who want to hold on to life. The horrifying memories can be remembered over and over again because it is not a forgettable incident.

II. Death and Suicide

Death has always been part of our lives and literature. Just like in Shakespeare's "*Othello*" ("Othello a Tragic Hero with Hamartia." *Bachelor and Master*. Web.), suicide and death are the basic concepts of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* too.

If you are a believer, after death; there is an eternity you will cross based on your acts in the world. You can be either punished, or rewarded in Heaven where they will only be ecstatic. The beauty of death is being a link for the pure goodness that you cannot know when you will pass from that bridge. However, for the other side, people see death as a kind of unjustness which can takes away the ones we care; we need, since human nature does need

love. It is essential that even feeling precious as if you are worthy of love makes people lively, healthy, and strong. It is the glamor that lies behind every piece of happiness, and makes you patient, and makes you avoid killing yourself. The ones who lack love can run after death in order to end their pain.

We can end our pain by suicide. A believer can suicide in many ways but with only one condition: they are always despondent. You may either do not care about religions, or so sad that you believe God can understand you (Al Hsu, "Christianity Today"), or only as a complete extermination especially after people understand that they lost their human feelings but the emptiness is the only residue. It shows that your difficulties took everything from you which makes you a human; both good and unwanted emotions at the same time and there is no hope for joy of living.

In this literary work, there has always been attracting side of death as well as life. Life attracts you as long as you enjoy out of it. In order to enjoy the life, the beauty that can be seen by looking around could be enough. When the conditions do not let you see the allurements around you, you may start to think about death. This is valid for both Septimus and Clarissa too.

MRS DALLOWAY: MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

I. STYLE AND STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The novel is written in omniscient narrator. Everyone's minds take place in the novel considering every piece of thought due to stream of consciousness. The perspective can shift so quickly that even a look of another person can lead to shift in perspective. The complex style of narration is used in order to make the story convincing and help understanding the characters. Despite the transparency of the characters' angles, the intricacy does not lessen since even the characters cannot be coherent on their interior monologues.

The novel was written in a poetic tone that is able to name confusing things which are hard for a human to understand due to the thoughtfulness of personae. Nevertheless, it is a huge struggle to understand the concept of death. Therefore, its fear is also shown by hyperbole which was always in the foreground since every image is described stronger than it is as if it is going to swallow the people, causing the readers getting lost between the places and minds eventually. The characters are created so ruminant, as they try to figure out what will happen after life, that even when they do not know themselves completely, they started to name confusing things which are impossible for normal humans to understand. The oxymoron of life and death was the most essential topic in the personae's minds, but the complexity of overthinking makes it felt as a paradox. The shift in these two issues is reflected by optimistic and pessimistic moods throughout the novel with the drawn imageries of the outer world

The novel set only in a day. However, the time concept has always been reminded through the storyline in every section that finally even two minutes were counted.

“The clock was striking-one, two, three: how sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering; like Septimus himself. She was falling asleep. But the clock went on striking, four, five, six and Mrs Filmer waving her apron...” (Woolf 127)

The reminder of time appears as a symbol of boring usual lives but increases with the tension like the heartbeat of a human heart as it beats faster when we feel strong emotions like the panic of death.

II. CONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTERS THROUGH DEATH

i. Getting Into Characters

Clarissa is the protagonist who loves Sally Seton although she is married to Richard Dalloway, an important man in London and he understands the value of their marriage in the novel. Nevertheless, she respects her husband. Since her husband is from the government she feels the necessity to befit her husband though, she is not capable of many things like politics, she feels as if she has to show that at least she has some skills in life. Feeling unskilled in life has become a trauma which she tries to deny and get over. For this reason she appears as a person who always cares about others' social criticism.

“her panic fear, which arose from three hundred pounds income, and her weaponless state (she could not earn a penny) and it made her timid, and more and more disqualified year by year to meet well-dressed”(Woolf 143)

Despite the fact that she lives the dream of many people, her life becomes usual after a while. Repetitiousness of each day makes her question her life and believe that all the untoward concepts in her life remain while other niceties diminish.

Septimus is the character who is married to Lucrezia. He has lost firstly, his friend in the First World War; and then lost his sanity as he suffers from *paranoid schizophrenia* in

which *severe distortion of reality with delusions and hallucinations of persecutions or of greatness, loss of judgement, unpredictable behaviours occurs* (Feldman 572) because of his hurtful regret on account of the war. He has witnessed so many people die including his close friend Evans. For benefits of the Great Britain, people had to fight against enemies. However, the cruel weapons that are used in the war took away so many lives, and increased selfishness of survival instinct. The war made Septimus see the true evil in human beings which makes them greedy liars. The chaos in the war made Septimus question how these civilisations still exist when wars they frequently started brought only catastrophe upon them, and what the meaning of life is. Even Septimus himself took place in the war and harmed so many people. What he did was in fact a crime against humanity. The horror of real world makes him desperate and forces him to escape from it because after this trauma, he perceives everything more frightening than it is.

“And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him.” (Woolf 13) He frequently thinks about Heaven, where the evil does not find existence although he is scared of both death and the world.

During his trauma, his wife always tried to rehabilitate him but her all attempts failed. As another point to highlight, it is understandable that Septimus was a kind and smart man as his wife has always respected him for that. *“...nobody could be like Septimus; so gentle; so serious; so clever.”*(Woolf 76) The cleverness image of Septimus was drawn by his love of literature. He has read so many poets such as Shakespeare, Dante etc. During post-war time, he does not seem to read. However, his literature knowledge is clearly visible.

ii. Life against Death

While thinking about death, mostly people hold on to love in their lives and beauty of the life.

When Clarissa's life is considered, she is not able to find true love in her marriage. Nevertheless, she sometimes thinks as, "*After all, she [Clarissa, herself] is married to Dalloway, and lived with him in perfect happiness all these years.*" (Woolf 131) For Clarissa, love only lies on her friendships as her relationship with Peter Walsh who has never gotten a return of his love although they remain friends. Another example applies for Sally Seton in a different way; Clarissa truly loves Sally, but she has never find courage to confess it. Still, Clarissa was able to indulge in her positive outlook towards her behaviours in the face of life. Sally Seton was always told as a reckless, energetic, cheerful girl and has always been the opposite of Clarissa and that made her the dream girl Clarissa was not able to be. Additionally, she has a beautiful daughter that she loves and wants to love more.

When she looks around herself, she is surrounded by people even she feels alone. All these love grow inside her heart and the love she takes although she cannot sense all of them gives her joy of living and makes her hold on to life.

According to Septimus' mind, despite all his pain; even he can see the world from a beautiful side sometimes and lets that side rule his inner voice as:

"...all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere." (Woolf 59)

If a man is married with true love, it is impossible for him to not be impressed by any kind of beauty, because he must be impressed by at least either the character or the physical appearance of his wife. In fact, Septimus has always loved his wife, the world, and living even if he has not admitted it. "*But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to*

die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings – what did they want?” (Woolf 127)

Everything Septimus felt attaches him to the life. Thus, what makes him decide to commit suicide was losing his feelings and love because of his extreme pain.

iii. Source of Fear

When people consider death, it can be a little frightening. (Feldman 473) There can be many reasons allow us to fear from death. One of them can be spending our lives with regrets.

What Clarissa regrets is, living a life without improving herself on any kind of skill. Still, in luxurious life her husband ensured, she sometimes need to be with insincere people that she does not like, but his husband respects to. Those people remind her of what she lacks that she is not capable of earning this kind of life, and she has to fit in the Richard Dalloway's life. As Clarissa also realizes her lack of self-confidence, she takes Lady Bexberough as an idol who is *“interested in politics like man; with a country house; very dignified, very sincere.”*(Woolf 9) and confident while Clarissa is even not capable of understanding politics.

Despite, all her deficits, what makes her regret more is getting older which makes Clarissa notice that she is getting closer to death. Even being called as “Mrs Dalloway” shows her responsibilities to her husband and shows that she is not young Clarissa who could enjoy the life more. She is not the girl who is beautiful and envied anymore as time always works against Clarissa and takes her joy of living.

The main source of Septimus' regret is his guilt. He had lost his friend, he took place in war in which the people kept destroying each other, and he lost his hope. He could try to make the world better in order to prevent more malignant and prevent people to suffer the pain of losses but the life also made him realize that many people can lie each other, and upset them. That makes Septimus Warren Smith to give up on human kind. While knowing that he took place in a huge crime, doing nothing to fix his faults but giving up inclines his regret

more and makes him scared of death. Nevertheless, Septimus always keeps reminding his mistakes to himself. Although his wife is told to make Septimus realize the outside world in order to show that the life is still going on, Septimus' perception of world and choice to live in his inner world with regrets impedes what his wife tries to do. He always sees Evans, as its image makes him remember the guilt of himself and the human beings, to carry on suffering from his pain, because "That's the thing about pain. It demands to be felt." (Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*) However, demanding pain does not decrease Septimus' fright but strengthens them.

When love can make people hold on to life, its deficiency can also make them scare from the idea of death.

While analysing Clarissa, it can be understood that she is an extraordinary woman as she believes that love is not a necessity in human's life. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that love can make her happy and in the lack of love, she can be depressive. Although Peter loves Clarissa and her husband understands the value of their marriage in the story, none of these sources of happiness are effective as her one true love, Sally; and her daughter, Elizabeth. Those people are the ones that Clarissa has pure love for. Since Clarissa neither feels any affection nor wants to share her daughter with anyone else, her attitude towards Elizabeth generates rigorous discussions with her. On the other hand, Sally has never been hers. As a result, these offending facts act as other forces that make her think about death and be scared. However, even in the lack of love, she still spreads out her positive feelings for others.

Despite all the cruelty of the world, feeling emotions is very precious. Even Septimus had a fear about that throughout the novel. What triggered Septimus to suicide is starting to feel nothing but emptiness; neither love of Rezia, nor beauty in the world, nor the guilt of the war. But sometimes it is also seen that he cannot be happy from his marriage in his inner world for a while, although his wife has always cared about him. "*He dropped her hand.*

Their marriage was over, he thought, with agony, with relief. The rope was cut; he mounted; he was free” (Woolf 57).

Another huge concept is inability of sharing our fears which makes us feel lonely. These communication problems can be observed on Clarissa and Septimus too.

Clarissa has always suffered from communication problems. People can find her insincere, because she always acted not like herself, but the one she has to be. Acting someone else has settled into her behaviours so much that she forgot how to be herself. “*How delightful to see you!’ said Clarissa. She said it to everyone. How delightful to see you! She was at her worst-effusive, insincere.*” (Woolf 142) Now, being herself is so different that people cannot understand when she is trying to be candid. Even herself, cannot figure out which one she truly wants to be. She both wants to make people love her and tries to seem as a respected woman. These two intentions can contradict with each other sometimes and creates a boundary with everyone around herself although she is a very sensitive woman that she can empathize with most of the people. She can understand others feelings as she feels many emotions herself too even though she does not show her feelings for neither others, nor life. Clarissa Dalloway can even empathize with the characters in literature because she loves literature. “*That was her feeling-Othello’s feeling, and she felt it, she was convinced, as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it...*” (Woolf 30) But no one can empathize with her.

Also being homosexual makes her alone as she cannot be understood by others. She experiences all kind of love but she cannot share her feelings. Therefore, she wants to escape from this world. She escapes from life to literature, in which everything can happen. Otherwise, the communication problems would already make her feel as if she is dead. Therefore literature makes her forget there is no one that can completely understand and reduces her fears.

While discussing Septimus, as he cannot express this vision; he cannot share his thoughts and emotions, and he is doomed to be alone in this world even he has a marriage.

Although he is unable to share his thoughts; he does not want to talk with the liars because his awareness made him believe that he is more special than others as the lord of human beings in the traumatic mind of his. "...Septimus, the lord of the men, should be free; alone..." (Woolf 57) Beside his communication issue, the effect of literature can also be seen from his thoughts. It is the reason why Septimus speaks poetic, and feels everything passionately exaggerated on the inside. Because of his sentiment, "*Septimus was one of the first to volunteer (to European War). He went to France to save an England which consisted entirely of Shakespeare's plays*"(Woolf 73) However his developed thoughtfulness, due to literature, was more than an emotional human can resist, and it takes away his mental health gradually until he commits suicide as he also knows that he does not deserve to face his problems alone. For Septimus, leaving this world is also a way of communication because of his inability to express himself.

iv. Reflection of Death through Literature

In the novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa and Septimus consider life and death, and for both of them, their interest of literature leave traces on their thoughts.

For Clarissa, literature makes her share her feelings with others when she is alone, yet sometimes she can exaggerate her feeling by herself and feel miserable. Due to her love of books, she prefers reading instead of sleeping. She also does not want to sleep because of her fear of death, and she always repeats the first two lines of 'Song' in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*:

*"Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages."*(Woolf, 8)

She always tells herself not to be scared of the things she cannot change. Fear does not make her gain anything.

Her passion of literature makes her believe that glorious occurrence can happen, and makes her hold on to life she leads. When Clarissa wants to run away from the life, she makes a decision between literature and death. Choosing death means denying her hope for good, her passion and everything that makes her feel alive. Yet, Clarissa chooses literature is to appease her fear. The repeated allegory of *Cymbeline*, and *Othello* symbolizes Clarissa herself. “...and feeling as she crossed the hall ‘if it were now to die, ‘twere now to be most happy’.”(Woolf 30) Although she did not lose any of her relatives and did not commit suicide, Clarissa also suffers from her jealousy just like Othello.

As for Septimus, literature was more effective before the war, which played a role in his wife falling in love with him. Love was also another effective concept about his vision of world too. However, the only thing left from his soul was his past attention to literature which causes him to live as if his actions were poetic. While for Clarissa, indulging in literature made her make a choice against death and for Septimus, it made everything about his suicide reasonable as if every epic act is possible.

v. Accepting Death

When the message of Septimus’s death announced in Clarissa’s party, Clarissa felt a connection between them when he does not know anything but suicide of him. Due to this connection, at first, Clarissa felt responsible of this suicide as she was not associated with the city but the upper class. The suicide of death is seen by Clarissa as an optimistic act somehow that her admiration of beauty outside and the feelings of herself increased.

“...and the words came to her, *Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him – the young man who*

had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun.” (Woolf 158)

She decided that we do not live this world when we die; we live in the memories of the people at least the ones who have seen us at the end of the book. Additionally, there is a challenge in both life and death. Committing suicide is also an example of intrepidity and to awake this reality makes people live more passionately. This illumination de-stresses Clarissa.

“A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death.” (Woolf 156)

Septimus’s death gave everyone a message that even himself made peace with both life and death and everything brightened for him. It also enabled his wife to understand his pain, and what he was trying to say.

CONCLUSION

Generally, it is told as death is easy while facing the life is braver and honourable. However, in this story the focus is not on bravery but the meaning, the essence of human life in the world.

Septimus appears as a man using suicide as a way of communication. When he feels nothing but emptiness, Septimus is reconciled with death. Until his suicide, neither of the characters is understood by any other people. After Clarissa learned his death, she empathizes with Septimus and understands him. As a result, she considers life twice, to enjoy more. Therefore, when Septimus dies, there is no one upset including his wife who remembers only the good memories with him and finally understood him.

As has previously been examined, between Septimus and Clarissa, there were always some similarities between their feelings. They suffer from communication problems, love literature, and have internal conflicts about life and death. However, only Septimus truly killed himself. Throughout the novel, the fear of death was reflected by stream of consciousness but in the end of the novel, it is accepted by everyone in the novel as a natural fact that living these precious moments is more important than worrying about the things we cannot change.

Therefore, the correlation between life and that was solved in the end of the novel by explain that every single moment and everyone in this world is significant that everyone creates an impression of themselves on each other's life, personality, and everything else.

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