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**Representations of Clarissa and Septimus in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*  
- A deconstructive approach combined with aspects of feminist and  
psychoanalytical criticism**

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Critical approaches to <i>Mrs Dalloway</i></b>	2
<b>Binary Oppositions – Clarissa and Septimus</b>	6
<b>Internal/External</b>	6
<b>Inclusion/Exclusion</b>	9
<b>Existence/Non-existence</b>	11
<b>Past/Present</b>	13
<b>Feminine/Masculine</b>	16
<b>Sane/Insane</b>	20
<b>Conclusion</b>	24
<b>Works Cited</b>	27

## Introduction

On the eighth of October 1922, Virginia Woolf writes in her diary: “I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side – something like that” (207). This study later became the novel *Mrs Dalloway*, published in 1925. Set in London during one day in June, *Mrs Dalloway* explores various thoughts and views on life, death, love, and society, through the minds of different characters moving around the city.

Clarissa Dalloway is a middle-class woman in her fifties, married to MP Richard Dalloway, about to host a party in the evening. She comes across Peter Walsh, a man with whom she was in love when she was young, who has just returned from a long stay in India. Their reunion stirs up emotions and creates images of what life used to be, and what it could have been, had things happened differently. The thoughts of her youth bring up memories of another love, Sally Seton, who later turns up at her party unannounced.

A character not directly connected to Clarissa, but crucial to Woolf’s study, is Septimus Warren Smith. He is a shell-shocked veteran from the First World War, suffering from depression. After witnessing his friend Evans die in the war without grief, he becomes unable to feel anything. Now he is married to Rezia, for whom he can show no affection. In an attempt to escape the brutality of human nature, here portrayed by judgemental doctors, he commits suicide. Even though he and Clarissa never meet, their characters reflect each other, in terms of their similar visions or perceptions of life and society, built up from a mixture of reality and imagination.

To write a novel where the world is “seen by the sane & the insane side by side” does not necessarily imply that the mental states of the characters can be strictly classified. To judge who is sane and who is insane is not a simple task to perform. Physical actions might be considered sane or insane, but mental actions, such as thoughts and feelings are difficult to categorize on the same scale, since they are constantly changing, and not expressed the way a

physical action is. Therefore, it is not always obvious who is sane and who is insane when characters' minds are explored over time, or in this case over the course of one day.

The notion of using a short time span can also be seen in for instance Joyce's *Ulysses* and in ancient Greek literature. The original title for *Mrs Dalloway* was "The Hours", suggesting that time itself plays an important role in the novel. Limited by time, Woolf offers a deep insight into the human mind, showing that long-lasting medical analysis is not always superior when it comes to representing the mental states of characters. The thoughts of Clarissa and Septimus are well kept from other people in society and their outsides do not reflect them. Clarissa is regarded as the perfect wife, mother and hostess, while Septimus is considered to be the brave, manly war hero. On the outside they seem to embody gender stereotypes, yet the defining of their roles is not obvious when comparing the conscious and the unconscious parts of the text, that is to say what is actually written and what can be read between the lines. Even though Woolf perhaps intended to categorize Clarissa and Septimus into opposites when it comes to sanity and gender, the text itself might prove otherwise.

The aim of this essay is to investigate whether Clarissa is a representation of sanity, and Septimus of insanity, or if a clear distinction cannot be made between them. In addition, it aims to find out whether Clarissa represents femininity and Septimus represents masculinity, or if their gender roles are ambiguous. By looking at a number of binary oppositions in the novel, taking into account views of literary critics, the characters of Clarissa and Septimus will be approached from a mainly deconstructive position, yet also interpreted from the perspective of feminist and psychoanalytical criticism.

### **Critical approaches to *Mrs Dalloway***

*Mrs Dalloway* is a nuanced novel that can be read and reread from various critical perspectives. Written in the stream of consciousness technique with a constant change of

narrator, the novel presents the reader with an opportunity to enter the minds and share the thoughts and actions of its characters. This might at first glance seem like a straightforward and open novel about an ordinary summer's day in 1920s London. Yet when the reader is allowed to follow the characters this closely, it raises questions on whether everything is what it seems to be, or if there are hidden layers behind the text that can be brought up to the surface through close reading and analysis.

The relationship between the characters of Clarissa and Septimus is an explicit example. They can be seen as each other's opposites, at the same time as each other's doubles. Clarissa is portrayed as the sane female and Septimus as the insane male. In an attempt to unravel the implicit about Clarissa and Septimus, and further trying to sort out whether their roles are set or not, this essay aims to combine deconstruction with feminist and psychoanalytical criticism. The reason for choosing these critical perspectives as suitable approaches to *Mrs Dalloway* is because of their relevance to the investigation. The dichotomies sane/insane and feminine/masculine are two binary oppositions never ceasing to invite deconstructive analysis (inside as well as outside the sphere of literature) and their contents can be connected to feminist and psychoanalytical theory. Given the nature of the subject matter, combining these approaches would seem appropriate.

By using deconstruction, the main opposition Clarissa/Septimus is analysed through a number of binary oppositions, which in some cases unite them, and in some cases divide them. This is done in order to question the hierarchy of the oppositions and thus question the representation of the two characters. Jonathan Culler offers an explanation by discussing the opposition presence/absence: "A deconstruction would involve the demonstration that for presence to function as it is said to, it must have the qualities that supposedly belong to its opposite, absence. Thus, instead of defining absence in the terms of presence, as *its* negation, we can treat "presence" as the effect of a generalized absence" (95).

Feminist criticism wants to bring out the female aspect, to evaluate the representation of women, and qualities that are commonly stated as feminine. One representation that can be seen in literary texts is that man is the norm, and woman is the “other”, or as stated: “Men have aligned the opposition male/female with rational/emotional, serious/frivolous, or reflective/spontaneous” (Culler 58). Due to the notion that some attributes are linked to gender, feminist theory can be used in combination with deconstruction in order to question the gender connection as well as the hierarchy of the opposing attributes.

Psychoanalytical criticism also aims to investigate what is hidden, engaging with the covert and overt parts of the text, the minds of the characters, which can also be traced back to the mind of the author. This critical theory can be linked to deconstruction when discussing oppositions like consciousness/unconsciousness, normal/pathological, reality/dream etc. Since the narrative technique in *Mrs Dalloway* focuses more on leaps of thought rather than linear realism, and the novel deals with subjects concerning the human psyche, such as existential questions, sanity and suicide, this critical approach is useful as well. The opposition of sanity/insanity in *Mrs Dalloway* then becomes interesting from a feminist as well as a psychological point of view, because here, the woman is the sane person – the norm, and the man is the insane – the “other”.

The combination of deconstruction, psychoanalytical and feminist criticism is suitable since the novel raises questions and oppositions about individual as well as social views on mental health and gender roles. On the subject of female development in relation to psychoanalysis, Elizabeth Abel claims that “Rather than influence, *Mrs. Dalloway* demonstrates the common literary prefiguration of psychoanalytic doctrine, which can retroactively articulate patterns implicit in the literary text” (171), indicating that Woolf had a way of expressing the female experience of development before Freud published his view on the subject in 1925, the same year as *Mrs Dalloway* was released.

The main goal of these critical approaches, to explore the underlying meanings in the text, can also be used in relating *Mrs Dalloway* to its author. Woolf experienced mental breakdowns during her lifetime, which involved treatments and recommendations from different doctors. Just like Septimus, she ended her life by killing herself. Her sexual preferences are reflected in Clarissa's; she was married to a man, but was equally (or perhaps more) attracted to women.<sup>1</sup> The novel's characters overall appear to be interested in reading literature, and share a common view of London as a city of beauty. Woolf began writing the novel in 1922, it was published in 1925, and it is set in 1923. To some extent, it can be presumed that the social context in *Mrs Dalloway* originates in Woolf's own life. Phyllis Rose argues that "*Mrs. Dalloway* represents Woolf's fullest self-portrait as an artist; it contemplates the relationship between her own madness and her creativity" (126). Further it is claimed that "Everyone is death-hunted, everyone is a poet, everyone is neurotic, everyone is a genius, everyone is Virginia Woolf", because every character seems to perceive the surroundings in a similar way, have a "nostalgic relationship to their past", and use metaphors to describe life (Nunez 172).

*Mrs Dalloway* was Woolf's fourth novel and she was making her way into the books of literary history. "*Mrs.Dalloway* is the first novel in which she taps unabashedly the great reservoir of feminine experience" (Rose 123). "She has, among other achievements, made a definite contribution to the novelist's art", E.M. Forster writes in an essay on Woolf's early novels (139). He continues by claiming that Woolf is someone who can change English fiction, and make its form innovative again (147-148).

The choice of critical approaches in this essay gives the opportunity of looking at the text itself, as an independent work, but also in relation to its author. The inquiry is based on binary

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<sup>1</sup> The main character in her novel *Orlando* for instance was based on one of her lovers, Vita Sackville-West (Bowlby 152).

oppositions, constructed from a close reading of the characters of Clarissa and Septimus, and further analysed with the help of psychoanalytical and feminist approaches.

## **Binary Oppositions – Clarissa and Septimus**

### **Internal/External**

The opposition internal/external is applicable to more than one aspect when it comes to Clarissa and Septimus. Firstly, there is difference between how they look at themselves and how other people see them. Secondly, they have an internal as well as an external perception of the world, in terms of imagination and reality, which unite as well as separate them.

Clarissa Dalloway is seen as a woman well adjusted to society; she is the perfect hostess, wife and mother belonging to the middle class. Even though this appearance is one she desires and tries to maintain, she is fragmented inside. She enjoys her situation in life, her family, her parties, and the fact of being able to admire the beauty of the city: “‘I love walking in London,’ said Mrs Dalloway. ‘Really, it’s better than walking in the country’” (Woolf 3). Yet she is ageing every second, she wonders what life could have been like, had she made other decisions when she was young. She thinks of herself as invisible, that her body has become nothing. She has even lost the connection between her body and her name; to other people she is no longer Clarissa, but instead Mrs Richard Dalloway (8-9). Her two images affect her thoughts and experiences in the outside world.

Varying between being Clarissa and being Mrs Dalloway, she constantly sways between memory and perception, between past and present, as well as integrating the different sensations, creating a web of consciousness, fantasy and reality. For one moment she is back in her early twenties, in the countryside at Bourton, experiencing youth and love in the company of Sally Seton and Peter Walsh. The next, she is back in London, cherishing life, yet feeling depressed. Her emotions sway between longing to disappear from her present life and

longing to be surrounded by people, to be a centre point. In a passage on the fragmented, internal Clarissa, Hermione Lee argues that “there is a continual interplay between her sense of reaching out to others and withdrawing from them; between her sense of failure, loss and coldness, and her involvement with the vivid, energetic pulse of life” (23). On the outside, she displays a composed, cold surface, but on the inside her mind works in order to turn away from the repressed passionate feelings of youth, and torments of life, that try to escape from her unconsciousness. This leaves her fragmented, divided between happiness and sadness. While her thoughts go to appreciating life, they also express a curiosity about death. She thinks of it as an end as well as a beginning, because she feels that the dead survive by becoming a part of nature itself. She wonders: “all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London ... she survived” (Woolf 7). She sees death as fulfilling, to be able to escape the world, yet still remain in it.

Similar thoughts of death as liberation exist in the mind of Septimus Warren Smith. He, like Clarissa, is fragmented and torn between his thoughts. From the outside, Septimus is seen as the brave war hero, who fought for his country. He is considered to be an able man who is happily married and content with life. Yet, on the inside, that is far from the truth. After the death of his friend Evans, he suffers from shell shock and, by trying to return to a normal life, he discovers that he has lost the ability to feel anything. He can see no happiness in life; where he sees beauty in nature, he sees cruelty in human nature. By going back to everyday life after the war, trying to live as usual, he has become depressed and confused, and is mentally unstable. His vision of life does not follow the norm, and his condition cannot be understood by society, here portrayed by two doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw. They try to treat him in different ways, to figure him out, which makes him turn away from life even more, convinced that humans are brutal creatures. Without being able to feel, he believes that

he is deserted and deserves to die: “The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes” (93). Septimus is so filled with repressed emotions that he thinks that he cannot feel at all. The post-traumatic stress and the pretence that everything is the way it should be make him believe that he has lost his feelings for good. Just like Clarissa, he creates a web of imagination and reality when looking at the world. Yet, in Septimus’s case, the web is more complex, and the different components are harder to separate, due to his condition. He floats in and out of imaginings, once mistaking Peter Walsh for the dead Evans: “‘For God’s sake don’t come!’ Septimus cried out. For he could not look upon the dead. But the branches parted. A man in grey was actually walking towards them” (69). What separates Septimus from Clarissa is that he “is not always able to distinguish between his personal response and the indifferent, universal nature of external reality” (Lee 30). In everyday life, Clarissa can manage, to some extent, to ignore her internal emotions and focus on the external, beauty in life, in London. Septimus can also appreciate outside beauty, but since he has not been given the time to grieve, he cannot shut out his internal emotions the way Clarissa can.

What unites Clarissa and Septimus is their way of blending internal and external, mixing fantasy and reality. It is argued that they share a way of translating “their emotions into physical metaphors” (Lee 30), by describing their feelings as experiences, or physical emotions including open sea, waves, fire, trees, pain etc. This notion is displayed quite a few times in the text. In one passage Septimus has an intense feeling of not belonging to the world, which makes him believe that he has been cast away to a distant place, that his body literally fades before his eyes: “the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock. He lay very high, on the back of the world. The earth thrilled beneath him” (Woolf 68). In a different passage, still transforming thoughts to physical feelings, Clarissa experiences the opposite of what Septimus does. By thinking of her parties, she feels that she is alive and manages to stay

firmly attached to the ground instead of leaving it. Even though she feels that her living days are limited, she appreciates life and her parties celebrate that. When thinking of life, her emotions become physical feelings: “Since she was lying on the sofa, cloistered, exempt, the presence of this thing which she felt to be so obvious became physically existent; with robes of sound from the street, sunny, with hot breath, whispering, blowing out the blinds” (122).

They also share a kind of conviction that death is an option that should not be dismissed, or as T.E. Apter claims: “Images of death are never merely deadly” (58). Both Clarissa and Septimus wish to be free, to escape from life and the physical world. Thus death is the path to freedom (58-59). Apter also reflects on the fact that many characters in the novel are compared to birds, as well as underwater creatures. It is argued that they symbolise movements towards life and death respectively, and that the two opposing movements are closely related, that they are “different aspects of the same movement” (57-58). This internal view of death unites Clarissa and Septimus, while it alienates them from external society.

### **Inclusion/Exclusion**

Clarissa and Septimus have both experienced what it is like to be excluded. Clarissa was at Bourton part of a female, worriless environment, with her mother, sister, her aunt, and Sally Seton. After her decision to marry Richard, she leaves the countryside in favour of London, and she becomes excluded from the female environment. By doing so, she enters another sphere, a patriarchal society where her role is set. Female company is reduced to her daughter Elizabeth, to whom she is not very close. Apart from that she has no female friends; she feels contempt for her daughter’s friend, Miss Kilman, and she does not get invited to Lady Bruton’s lunch party, which upsets her. By not being invited, she feels more distanced to her younger self; she has once again been excluded from female company and it makes her feel “aged, breastless” with a failing body (Woolf 29). The exclusion from the female sphere has

led to the inclusion in the male sphere, where her role changes, described by Abel as a part of Clarissa's female development (164). By arranging a party, she emphasises her role as the perfect hostess, at the same time as she gets to be the most important person, reinventing the sense of being part of a selected circle that she used to be when she was a young woman.

In contrast to Clarissa, Septimus used to be included in the patriarchal society, but is now excluded from it. A young, healthy man signing up as a volunteer in the war is someone useful to society, a shell-shocked war veteran is not. He has experienced such horrors performed by man that he can no longer be part of society. He has lived through something that nobody else can understand, realising the cruelty that exists in humans, and so he does not fit in anymore. Since he has turned his back on society, he feels like a deserter, an outcast. The two doctors trying to cure him become the worst creatures to him; human beings trying to force him into seeing the world the way they see it, to force him back into the society he left: "‘Must’, ‘must’, why ‘must’? What power had Bradshaw over him? ‘What right has Bradshaw to say “must” to me?’ he demanded" (Woolf 149). His situation is hopeless because he cannot escape while living among people, and he cannot continue to live emotionless in a brutal world: "Septimus Smith is the perfect victim: his sensitivity to the pain in the world makes him intolerable to those who do not wish to see the pain; the individuality of his vision makes him unable to survive in a world that demands crafty self-defence and shallow self-assurance" (Apter 61). His only option is to kill himself, to exclude himself not only from society, but also from life itself.

The shared experience of being included and excluded in various stages of their lives makes it complicated for Clarissa and Septimus to adapt to society. In addition it makes them feel uncertain about their mere existence in time.

### **Existence/Non-existence**

The notion of time in *Mrs Dalloway* is almost like an extra narrator, or a character in its own right. In the absence of chapter divisions, time, represented by clocks, becomes the coordinator that structures the characters and events, separating past from present, morning from evening. It also acts as a witness to characters' existence or non-existence, by constantly continuing through births and deaths. The opposition existence/non-existence enlightens how Clarissa and Septimus regard themselves. By hearing Big Ben, and other clocks, they are reminded of their existence in linear time. Yet they escape into non-existence by fleeing to the past, to the future, or into pure fantasy untied by time and reality, through their imagination. To some extent, it can be said that both are non-existent in the present as well as existent, struggling in opposite directions.

Clarissa strives to become wholly existent in the present time, to be able to release the burden of her past, and live life now despite her growing older. She watches an old woman living alone across the street, and sees in her a possible future, which frightens her. Therefore, she tries to focus on living every instant: "Clarissa ... plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there – the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings" (Woolf 35). She sees her own reflection in the mirror and composes a look to become whole: "That was her self – pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together ... one diamond" (35-36). Earlier, she has mentioned the diamond as a symbol of the treasured kiss she got from Sally Seton all those years ago. By looking at herself in the mirror, drawing the parts together, she tries to invoke a sense of happiness in her present existence. Later she sits mending her evening dress, pulling the threads and fabric together. The repetition of drawing parts together implies that she not only wants to state her existence to herself in the mirror, but also to the world, by showing herself in the no longer broken dress at her party.

Septimus, on the other hand, strives to become non-existent, to disappear from everyday life. Yet he is afraid of losing his existence, of being swept away by the waves and drowned, or of being consumed by flames (142-143). He feels as if he cannot do anything by himself, and he does not want to be left alone. As a response to Clarissa's sewing, stating her existence, Septimus's wife sits by his side, sewing a hat. Septimus helps her, by selecting beads, flowers and ribbons, designing the hat. Although he cannot sew, he has a "wonderful eye" (145) and can therefore picture the hat before it is finished. This can be interpreted as Septimus's inability to draw the parts of his self together, that he has an idea of what kind of existence he desires, but cannot fulfil it alone. Because he cannot define his existence at the present time, he chooses non-existence. This is symbolised by the hat being given away once it is finished.

The rendering of present time is difficult for the characters, since time itself seems to be torn, or "haunted by its ghosts and thus 'out of joint,' entangled, confused and mad" according to Fay Chen and Chung-Hsiung Lai (232). They argue that "Clarissa suffers from schizophrenia-like time which both splits and structures her ontology, or Being-in-the-world, from time to time" and that Septimus's internal time stopped long ago, and though he tries to find "the meaning of life in his past," he searches in vain "for a time that is forever out of joint" (233). This is an interesting point made, and it can be argued that the different clocks in *Mrs Dalloway* support the notion of time itself being mad.

Big Ben is the dominant teller of time, always making people stop and reflect on it. It has the authority and control and gives the impression of displaying time as something visible: "The leaden circles dissolved in the air" (Woolf 2). Yet there are other clocks that interfere with the accepted authority, for instance St Margaret's that strikes just after Big Ben, also "claiming" to be on time, to affect her listeners: "the sound of St Margaret's glides into the recesses of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring of sound" (49). Another example is the

clocks of Harley Street, which can be associated with Bradshaw, the doctor obsessed with proportion and control: “Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion” (103). The different clocks present different options of time, of reality, and it can be questioned which option is the right one. It can also be questioned whether there is one to define Clarissa’s and Septimus’s existence. As a result of time, past and present, they flow between existence and non-existence.

### **Past/Present**

The reason behind Clarissa’s and Septimus’s fragmented selves lies in their past, and their inability to wholly commit themselves to the present. Though their experiences are completely different, they share a common sense of loss and exclusion, which they cannot escape from. They try to protect themselves by forcing their feelings into repression, yet those feelings come back to haunt them. Apter claims that “The capacity of the present to contain the past naturally makes the past appear as immediate. Memories become entangled in present thoughts and perceptions” (55), explaining their situation.

Clarissa is torn because of her decision some thirty years ago to marry Richard, thus turning her back on the countryside, a passionate life with Peter or in the company of Sally, in favour of a dispassionate relationship in London. When she was at Bourton she had no social obligations, no role that she had to play. She was in love with Sally, who represented freedom and beauty, and they shared a warm and feminine connection, “a sense of being in league together ... (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe)” (Woolf 33).

She was also in love with Peter, yet had she married him, she feared that her freedom would have been reduced: “with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable ... she had to break with him or they would have been destroyed, both of

them ruined, she was convinced” (6). By marrying Richard she gave up passion, but kept her independence. She hid her emotions and, because of that, the pain inflicted by her choice still torments her today: “Clarissa is both perfectly conventional in her role as a lady and hostess and, at the same time, a misfit: *Mrs Dalloway* is all about the fact that she is still unresolved in a choice apparently completed a generation before” (Bowlby 79-80).

Septimus also made choices in the past that have left him in deep melancholy in the present. He left his mother to go to London and become a poet. Whilst there, he fell in love with Isabel Pole, his literature teacher, and wrote her numerous texts expressing his love. Yet his career as a poet was not prosperous. When war came, he “was one of the first to volunteer” (Woolf 86). He had a somewhat romanticised vision of his future, to fight for his country “which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress” (86) and then return happy, knowing that he had accomplished something in life. Yet when he left England, he met his officer, Evans, and they formed a warm relationship based on friendship and respect: “It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug” (86). When Evans was killed, Septimus felt indifferent, and thought that was reasonable. Yet a piece of him died as well, which is manifested in his creeping, panic-filled discovery that he cannot feel. Initially he tries to evoke his feelings again by marrying Rezia, but it is as if Evans’s death took the notion of love away from Septimus. By telling himself that everything will go back to normal and shutting in his feelings, he becomes shell-shocked and starts to disappear in melancholy, unable to separate the past from his present.

This incapability to turn away from one’s past is shared by Clarissa and Septimus. Despite their different backgrounds, they share some common events that can offer explanations to their similarities in present life. They both left their family homes in their youth and replaced old habits with new lives in London. There are gaps to be found in both stories, for instance the reason why Septimus left his mother, and why Sally and Clarissa decided to part. None of

these parts are included in their respective narrations. The fact that Clarissa also suffered from the tragic loss of her mother and sister is hardly dwelt on at all. Perhaps in these hidden parts of the characters, an explanation to their behaviour can be found. Both motherless, they found in Sally and Isabel Pole female role models, mother figures as well as potential lovers.

In Clarissa's case, she knew that a future with Sally was not possible, and therefore chose the option that would give her most privacy, and involve less emotion. She chose herself and thus said no to a passionate life with Peter, because she could not get what she wanted the most. Parallels can be drawn to Septimus's choice. After the war, instead of going back to England and marrying Isabel Pole, he decided to marry Rezia. By making this choice, he was not expected to play a certain role; he did not have to put up an image of a passionate poet, which would have been the case otherwise. He also needs his independence, and by marrying Rezia, he chooses himself, because the love he had read and written about proved to be a fake. Their common decision, to choose privacy before passion contributes to their conditions, and hangs on to them like a dark shadow, denying them the ability to live life in the present. Yet, while Clarissa tries to put her past behind her and struggles to fit into present society, Septimus's only option is to destroy the opposition of past and present through death.

By committing suicide, he can finally leave everything behind and become free. In one way he is also liberating Clarissa through his action. She hears about his suicide at her party, and it is as if she connects with him, she understands him. She feels as if "her body went through it ... her dress flamed, her body burnt ... it was her disaster – her disgrace" yet at the same time it was "Odd, incredible; she had never been so happy" (Woolf 187-188). Septimus's choice of death becomes her choice of life. She looks at the old woman across the street, but without fear this time. She has, in this moment, left her sorrows behind and become free, just like Septimus: "She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living" (189).

She experiences such strong emotions because she is now assured that there is someone else out there who feels the way she does. Her choice between living and dying is decided through his action. It can be argued that, from her perspective, he dies for her. His death makes her realise that life is precious and that it is possible to be freed from past experiences, either by dying or by living on to create new experiences every day.

### **Feminine/Masculine**

A part of Clarissa's and Septimus's issues with fitting in lies in the aspect of gender roles in society. The image of rational men and emotional women gets questioned in *Mrs Dalloway*, when it comes to the two characters.

Clarissa occupies a role that changes when she leaves Bourton. From a secure, feminine environment, where she could experience homosexual feelings, she went into a male world where only heterosexuality was accepted and other sexual feelings had to be repressed. Abel describes this as “an emotionally pre-Oedipal female-centered natural world” in contrast to “the heterosexual male-dominated social world” (164). In *Female Sexuality*, Freud presents a theory that one path of transmission from pre-Oedipal to Oedipal orientation (to turn from the mother to the father) can end up in a “masculinity complex”, by clinging to the mother instead of turning to the father. Often, this results in homosexuality (qtd. in Abel 172). With Sally taking the place as both mother and an object of affection, Clarissa may have felt in her a clash between femininity and masculinity: “Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was. She knew nothing about sex – nothing about social problems” (Woolf 32). From Sally Clarissa learns about life, literature and love. They spend hours together, talking about how they could change the world: “The ideas were Sally's, of course – but very soon she was just as excited ... Sally's power was amazing, her gift, her

personality” (32). Exchanging a matriarchal surrounding for a patriarchal society should have left her even more confused.

During one scene in the novel, Clarissa reflects on her situation, and describes her attraction to women as feeling “what men felt” (Woolf 30). She is charmed by women’s beauty but she also admires strong, powerful women that are interested in politics and prefers rational acts before emotional, for instance Lady Bexborough, who opened a bazaar “with the telegram in her hand” saying that her son just got killed in the war (2), indicating a masculine sense. In contrast, she concludes that love between the sexes does not have a certain quality “which could only exist between women” suggesting that a strictly feminine relationship is more desirable: “The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one’s feeling for a man” (32). It seems that she experiences a mixture of feminine and masculine emotions due to her change of environment and her feelings towards both sexes. When thinking about her relationship to Richard, she compares herself to a nun or virgin, confined to a narrow bed, feeling asexual, and breastless, despite having given birth (29-30). She feels as if she has lost her womanhood, what she sees in the mirror is not what it used to be. These emotions and fragmented roles are brought upon her by trying to maintain an expected, feminine role in a patriarchal society.

Septimus also feels the pressure of fitting in a role. Just like Clarissa, he slips between masculinity and femininity because of the change of circumstances in his life. In his younger years he felt part of the masculine society. When his intended career failed, he felt the pressure to contribute and therefore went to war to “prove himself a man”. What he did perhaps not expect was to evoke feelings for Evans of a more sexual kind than just friendship: “he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name ... They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other” (86). When Evans died, Septimus “congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably”

(87), indicating that he was proud that he reacted in a masculine way. It is not certain that he was aware of his feelings for Evans; they could have remained in his unconscious. When returning to society after the war experience, his emotions are deeply repressed, and he feels as if he cannot feel at all. By hiding his true emotions he suffers, or in the words of Susan Bennett Smith: “Septimus’s unacknowledged homoerotic feelings for Evans make it difficult for him to come to terms with his death” (n. pag.).

In one scene Septimus discovers that Rezia has removed her wedding ring from her finger because her hand has grown too thin. His reaction displays mixed emotions: “He dropped her hand. Their marriage was over, he thought, with agony, with relief” (Woolf 67). Although he is afraid of being alone, he feels somewhat released from the burden of pretending to be happy in his situation. Later he confesses to himself that “he had married his wife without loving her; had lied to her; seduced her; outraged Miss Isabel Pole” (91), indicating that his feelings belonged to, and died with, Evans.

Both Clarissa and Septimus live in safe, yet presumably sexless marriages to keep up appearances, while they secretly mourn their lost loved ones. Their ways of mourning differ though, in terms of separating feminine mourning as more emotional, and masculine mourning as more rational. Here, Clarissa is the rational one, trying to be composed and correct every moment. Peter Walsh thinks that she has “grown hard” and remembers: “There was always something cold in Clarissa” (47-48). Septimus, on the other hand, is depressed, emotional, and no longer cares about being reasonable the way he was when Evans died. Now he cries openly, either for sorrow or beauty, and to Rezia it is “the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying” (142). He has lost his masculinity by becoming shell-shocked; he has not behaved the way society expected him to behave. The question is posed whether “Septimus is feminized by his tears and excluded from being an acknowledged mourner by his gender?” (Smith n. pag.). Barbara Hill Rigney claims

that “Clarissa and Septimus are both “feminine” characters because they are both victimized by a ‘male-supremacist system’” (qtd. in Taylor 371). Yet it can be argued that they are feminine in different ways. Septimus is automatically labelled because of his mourning, while Clarissa is forced to play a role, although she does not feel entirely feminine. Both of them feel forced to repress their homosexuality. It seems as if they are on the verge of androgyny rather than being part of one gender.

Nancy Taylor suggests that Woolf tries to create an androgynous ideal by letting the language of Clarissa and Septimus change between prose and poetry, two forms that are thought to be examples of masculine and feminine writing respectively (376). She continues by giving examples from Lacanian theory of symbolic and semiotic language in the novel, where a straightforward, prosaic narrative describes the symbolic, and the semiotic is more poetic, described by imagery and metaphors (376). Since Clarissa and Septimus use both types, the attempt to decide gender roles through language fails.

It is argued that *Mrs Dalloway* reflects Woolf’s rejection of a society where “powerful men talk a great deal of nonsense and the woman’s place is decorative, entertaining and subservient” (Lee 17). It seems as if Woolf wanted to erase the opposition feminine/masculine, or at least question its hierarchal order by making both Clarissa and Septimus uncertain of their gender roles. Perhaps Woolf wanted to reflect upon her own situation as a married woman attracted to other women in the early twentieth century, thus conveying female experience.

Yet Anglo-American feminist Elaine Showalter argues that perhaps Woolf is not the feminist writer many other critics consider her to be. She claims that Woolf uses androgyny, defined as “full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements” (263), as a flight from “her own painful femaleness”, that it is a form of repression (264, 288). In *A Room of One’s Own* Woolf claims that it is fatal for writers to “think of their

sex ... to be a man or woman pure and simple.” Instead they should be “woman-manly or man-womanly” (Woolf qtd. in Showalter 288). According to Showalter, Woolf fails to express female experience because she tries to write in a sexless manner. She also fails because she writes about women belonging to another social class than she does, which means she cannot know their experience, at the same time as “avoiding describing her own experience” (294). Yet, if Clarissa and Septimus reflect Woolf’s own life in terms of confused gender roles (and social class in Clarissa’s case), she *is* describing her own experience.

In contrast to Showalter, Toril Moi claims that Woolf instead of fleeing from gender identities, “rejects them because she has seen them for what they are” and that she has understood the goal of feminist struggle: “to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity” (12). To reject “the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition” is a position described by French feminist Julia Kristeva, where she questions the meaning of “sexual identity ... in a scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged” (33-34). By taking into account the ideas of Kristeva and Derrida, Woolf’s texts are suitable for feminist readings (Moi 15). In conclusion, it can be argued that through deconstruction of Clarissa’s and Septimus’s gender roles in *Mrs Dalloway*, in combination with her own experience being described, Woolf is a feminist trying to give new perspectives on femininity and masculinity in relation to homosexuality and society.

### **Sane/Insane**

The concepts of sanity and insanity are central in *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf meant to show the world from both aspects, to compare how individuals perceive the same events and surroundings in different ways. The judgement whether someone is mad or not, often comes from an exterior source, based on norms and moral values in society. In her diary, Woolf writes about her work on the novel: “I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at

work, at its most intense” (248). Clarissa and Septimus are both misfits in society. They react to things differently while they have a lot in common, their minds working in similar ways, experiencing the same feeling of not belonging to their time, to their lives: “She [Clarissa] sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense ... 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” (Woolf 6). She has a constant fear of living, while death seems to her somewhat tempting.

Septimus does not fear life, but suffers from having to be surrounded by people after having felt their cruelty, while experiencing the horrors of war. He feels as if he has seen death already, and that there is no turning back to life as he knew it. His fantasy is similar to Clarissa’s, but the difference is that while she is still sitting in her boat, afraid, Septimus has fallen out of it: “I lent over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still” (68).

Septimus tries to shut out humans from his mind, and sets loose his imagination instead. Thus he has difficulties separating the two, although he tries to think clearly, “for one must be scientific above all things” (67). Clarissa also tends to mix vivid imagination and reality, especially when she is alone with her thoughts. Yet she is able to distinguish between them when she is together with other people. The similarity and difference between them, Rose argues, is that “Septimus’s recurring sensation of falling – into the depths of the sea or burning flames – speaks to some potential for bottomlessness in all of us, and reminds us that while Clarissa may be a mermaid, he is a deep-sea diver and has plunged into depths, has explored areas she systematically closes off” (136).

Their different ways of dealing with depression consists of Septimus mentally escaping society through his imagination, and physically by ending his life. For Clarissa, the fear lies in escaping mentally, so she throws parties as therapy, and surrounds herself with people in

order to stay firmly anchored in reality. At first glance, it may seem as if Septimus is the insane one, since his mental instability is conveyed to other people, while Clarissa's is not. As long as society functions as judge, Clarissa is safe and Septimus is labelled, she is normal and he is mad. Apter suggests that their level of sanity might not be different after all: "A person lives with others' visions, and therefore a threatening, uncomfortable vision such as that of Septimus must be destroyed. Mrs Dalloway, however well adapted she is to the social aspects of the public world, does not share the general denial of the reality of Septimus's vision" (61), indicating that Clarissa and Septimus have a common way of perceiving the world around them that is not shared by society.

In order to draw a clear line between sanity and insanity when it comes to depression, or mourning in Clarissa's and Septimus's case, a definition of normal versus pathological mourning is demanded. Smith presents Freud's theory, saying: "it is not a matter of the severity of the symptoms, but rather a matter of their composition or longevity" (n. pag.). Freud also limits the time of normal mourning to a period of one to two years, and argues that one way of separating a melancholic person from a normal mourner is the melancholic's loss of self-esteem (qtd. in Smith n. pag.). Both Clarissa and Septimus suffer from lack of self-esteem. Clarissa gets insecure and feels degraded when she is not invited to Lady Bruton, and Septimus feels as if he is the scapegoat of society. Even though Septimus's condition seems to be more severe, in terms of mixing reality and imagination, it does not imply that Clarissa is not affected as well. Her period of mourning has been going on for some thirty years, firstly dominated by her choice, lately by her fear of ageing alone as a result of that choice. Septimus has suffered from shell shock for half a decade. According to Freud's theory, both cases classify as pathological mourning, which further seems to suggest that both suffer from melancholy.

There are some pieces missing in Clarissa's history when it comes to her reaction on the move to London, her marriage to Richard, and the birth of her daughter. Likewise when it comes to Septimus's life when he returned to London with his wife after the war. These disunities in the text may contain important clues to their situations today. Perhaps Clarissa felt the same way Septimus does now, but learned how to cling on to reality and not succumb to imagination. To separate from Sally in addition to the earlier loss of her mother and sister, the Freudian notion of leaving the pre-Oedipal stage, may have caused a strong reaction, not entirely different from Septimus's reaction to his traumatized experiences. Yet instead of ending up like Septimus, she developed a fear of living and a continuous fascination for death. Septimus, on the other hand, perhaps thought that he had control in the beginning, that he would start to feel eventually, and that he still had a place in society. Yet he found himself becoming appalled by humanity, sinking deeper and deeper into depression as the years went by.

Woolf herself ended her life by committing suicide, and suffered from bad mental health from an early age. In the aftermath of her mother's death, she experienced her first mental breakdown (Rose 113). She describes her own initial reaction to the death of her mother: "She's pretending, I said, aged 13, and was afraid I was not feeling enough." (qtd. in Rose 110). Clear parallels can be drawn to Septimus's reaction to Evans's death, as well as Clarissa's loss of her mother when she was young. She found it hard to write the mad scenes in the novel, saying: "of course the mad part tries me so much, makes my mind squirt so badly that I can hardly face spending the next weeks at it" (qtd. in Lee 18). Even though Woolf had periods of insanity in her life, it is more likely that she should be labelled sane rather than insane. In a letter to E.M. Forster, she writes: "Not that I haven't picked up something from my insanities and all the rest. Indeed, I suspect they've done instead of

religion” (qtd. in Rose 138) indicating that she was able to find other aspects of her insanities than just bad ones.

In describing his wife’s change in condition, Leonard Woolf wrote that “she passed across the border which divides what we call insanity from sanity” (qtd. in Rose 142), which unites with Rose’s suggestion that “sanity and insanity are merely two points on the same continuum and not two radically different states” (142). The image of a scale where sanity and insanity differ in degree, not type, is applicable in the case of Clarissa and Septimus. By using this method of “measuring” the degree of sanity, not only are they put on an equal level, moreover, the need to label them individually disappears. Instead of them being situated on either side of the scale, they occupy different degrees in different situations. Yet, Septimus is undoubtedly more often closer to insanity compared to Clarissa, while her degree of sanity varies between the two extremes.

## **Conclusion**

The representations of Clarissa and Septimus in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* have been questioned in this essay. The aim was to discover whether Clarissa represented sanity and femininity, and Septimus represented insanity and masculinity. By approaching the novel through three critical views, six binary oppositions have been used to analyse Clarissa and Septimus. The oppositions were selected in order to look at different aspects of the characters, in the light of other critical opinions. The analysis reveals that in many aspects, Clarissa and Septimus are alike, despite their different social, as well as geographical backgrounds. Although they never actually meet, they are connected by the fact that they both end up in London; they are both walking around the city that summer’s day in June.

When Septimus commits suicide, it creates an indirect connection between them. In addition they share a vision of the world that does not fit within society norms, which leaves

them excluded from it. This creates an insecurity concerning their own existence, which derives from the difficulties of separating between past and present, their internal selves and the external world. What divides them are their different levels of ability to adapt themselves to society, in terms of gender and sanity. Clarissa is swaying between femininity and masculinity, because of her change from a feminine homosexual environment to a male-dominated, heterosexual society. Certain demands are put on her: she should become a perfect hostess, wife and mother and she ends up feeling sexless. Septimus lost a dear friend, or lover, in a war that also took the faith in human beings away from him. His feminine way of mourning and his repressed homosexuality cause him to “lose his masculinity”, since society norms do not allow him to be emotional.

Clarissa’s and Septimus’s different ways of facing their new realities are crucial to their survival; Clarissa continues to live and Septimus commits suicide. Their different degrees of sanity ultimately affect their way of fitting in, and eventually, their life and death. Clarissa is difficult to define because she keeps depressed thoughts to herself, showing only a composed surface to the world. Yet, on several occasions her imagination is quite similar to Septimus’s, showing traces of insanity in her. She changes her degree of sanity now and then, therefore, in relation to Septimus, it cannot be argued that she is completely sane. Septimus is deeply immersed in melancholy, and has a blurred perspective on reality and imagination. Even though he has moments of sanity, he is very close to getting lost in insanity. It can be argued that Clarissa is more successful in adapting her life to society because she tries to be rational rather than emotional. By contrast, Septimus never succeeds in the same way. He abandons rational thinking and ends up with deep melancholy. The only way to find peace is to escape from life. Yet, through Septimus’s act, Clarissa manages to find peace. She understands his choice, thinking about death as both defiance and a way of holding on to his vision.

The interpretation that Woolf put a lot of herself in the two characters seems plausible, which also made it possible for her to create an intimate portrait of sanity and insanity, femininity and masculinity, shared between Clarissa and Septimus, like mirror reflections. Due to their varying degrees of sanity, it can be argued that the representations of Clarissa as sane and Septimus as insane are incorrect.

The notion of Clarissa and Septimus being mirror reflections applies to their gender insecurity as well, suggesting that they are varying between different degrees of heterosexuality and homosexuality, femininity and masculinity. Therefore, the representations of Clarissa as feminine and Septimus as masculine are also incorrect.

In conclusion it can be said that no definite distinction can be made between sanity and insanity, femininity and masculinity in the representations of Clarissa and Septimus. They both possess all four qualities in various degrees, which in combination with their abilities to adapt to society norms, determinates their different fates.

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