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Winner of the 2010 Sorenson Award The Katherine M. Sorenson Award recognizes one student in Literary Study II whose presentation reveals him or her to be a superior reader of the novel, exhibiting in his or her reading, writing, and delivery Katherine's characteristic virtues: a precise intelligence and wit, a capacious imagination, and a humane learning.

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SIDONIE BLANKS

Winner of the 2010 Sorenson Award

Septimus’ and Clarissa’s Transcendent Communication in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway

When, at the end of Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa Dalloway is told of Septimus Smith’s suicide during her party, she thinks, “[o]h!...in the middle of my party, here’s death” (MD 162). What follows is a profound meditation on the meaning of Septimus’ suicide which constitutes the novel’s thematic climax. Clarissa’s reaction here is a problem for many critics because Mrs. Dalloway presents the effects of intersecting “vectors of oppression and privilege” (Ritzer 204). Clarissa is a woman both victimized by patriarchal oppression and participatory in the oppression of others through her privileged position within London’s upper-class; Septimus is a shell-shocked war veteran defined by masculine systems but without access to the privileges Clarissa’s wealth affords her. In fact, almost every character in the novel simultaneously participates in and suffers from oppressive behavior that limits their ability to know, relate to, and communicate with each other. Although Clarissa’s wealth causes many to read this climactic scene as a cheapening of Septimus’ death, Woolf insists that they share a common struggle against those who try to “forc[e] your soul” (MD 163). This struggle renders Clarissa cold and divided and prompts Septimus’ plunge out of the window; however, Septimus’ act of self-destruction also preserves his integrity and autonomy and transcends the barriers created by oppression and privilege, resulting in a mystical act of communication and discovery that restores Clarissa’s sense of self.

In writing Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf intended to “criticise the social system, and show it at work, at its most intense” (A Writer’s Diary 56). Accordingly, the narrative acknowledges society’s “vectors of oppression and privilege,” which George Ritzer defines as “[t]he varied intersections of a number of arrangements of social inequality (gender, class, race, global location, sexual preference, and age) that serve to oppress women differentially” (Ritzer 204). This concept, broadly termed intersectionality theory, envisions society and its institutions as rendering individuals simultaneously oppressed and privileged. Intersectionality theory is particular to feminism; however, because gender is just one of many forces in society that contribute to social inequality, it applies to all people experiencing and participating in differing oppressive forces. Ultimately, it suggests that these forces are interrelated and can shape people’s perspectives, assumptions, and interactions with others in complex ways.
Because of the wide array of perspectives it portrays, *Mrs. Dalloway* is well suited to Bakhtinian readings; however, intersectionality theory provides a more specific vocabulary because conflicting perspectives in the novel result specifically from oppressive systems. The story-world crafted by Woolf is a diverse and lively London populated by people of differing genders, disabilities, socioeconomic statuses, and sexualities. Each character occupies a unique position within the narrative’s classist, patriarchal, and heteronormative society and offers a unique perspective depending on that position. Woolf uses free indirect discourse to penetrate the minds of each character, which leads to numerous contested narratives, but Woolf resists privileging any voice over another. In addition to the novel’s main characters, images of “poor mothers of Westminster and their crawling babies” (*MD* 102), musings on “what could be done for female vagrants” (*MD* 102), and descriptions of the “exquisite passing to and fro through swing doors of aproned white-capped maids” during lunch saturate the novel and suggest a vision inclusive of London’s entire social stratus (*MD* 91). Clearly, Woolf intentionally gives voice to London’s diverse population in order to present the personal effects of socially accepted systems of oppression.

Yet Woolf also argues through her style that common understandings and genuine communication can and do exist. Concerning *Mrs. Dalloway*, she wrote, “I shall say a great deal about [it] and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters...[t]he idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment” (*A Writer’s Diary* 59). Accordingly, she carefully links the novel’s disparate characters—especially Clarissa and Septimus—through repeated scenes, phrases, and images, the implications of which come together in a visionary moment at Clarissa’s party when she hears about a “young man” who “had killed himself” (*MD* 162).

Upon learning of Septimus’ suicide, Clarissa retreats into an empty room, where “[t]he party’s splendour fell to the floor, so strange it was to come in alone in her finery” (*MD* 163). The persona of “perfect hostess” melts away (*MD* 5), leading to an awareness of her artificiality; “party’s splendour” and “finery” suggest ornament and decadence. She thinks, “[h]e had killed himself—but how? Always her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt...[u]p had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness” (*MD* 163). Clarissa feels and sees his death even though she has never met him. She compares herself to him with unusual insight, stating that he had preserved something essential that in her life has been “wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured” (*MD* 163). In contrast to the feelings of alienation or uncertainty that have plagued her throughout the day, she finds in Septimus’ suicide stability: she sees “defiance,” “communication,” and “an embrace” (*MD* 163), all definitive words and ideas. In a passage prolific with images and allusions that have permeated the novel up to this point, Clarissa concludes that “she felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself” (*MD* 165). Ultimately, all signs point to a
mystical, symbolic connection with Septimus filled with discovery not only of
the self but of another.

Clarissa’s feelings of relation to Septimus are provocative to the reader
because Woolf emphasizes their differences. That a rich, privileged, and
frequently self-centered woman benefits spiritually from a poor, mad war
veteran’s suicide is indeed hard to swallow. It is not surprising that many
critics find her undeserving of the visionary role assigned to her by Woolf. For
example, Deborah Guth asserts that “Clarissa’s identification with Septimus is
spurious” (Guth 20). Herbert Marder, although he recognizes Clarissa’s merits,
also finds her “morally obtuse” because of her connection to “fashionable
society” (Marder 54, 60); and Jeremy Hawthorn claims that Woolf reaches no
conclusion because her own economic privilege blinded her to the real effects
of classism.

These critics find support in other characters’ opinions of Clarissa and
Clarissa’s own comments. Peter accuses her of being “hard” and “sentimental”
(MD 42), and derisively labels her “the perfect hostess.” Similarly, Miss Kilman
thinks her a “[f]ool” who deserves to be “unmasked” (MD 110). Because
Clarissa is rich and they are not, it is tempting to trust these critical assessments,
all of which relate to the arrogance that can come with wealth. Several remarks
made by Clarissa also suggest insincerity, frivolity, or egoism; she states that
“the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps…can’t
be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason; they
love life” (MD 2). When asked to invite her poor cousin, Ellie Henderson, to her
party, she complains to Richard, “[b]ut why should I ask all the dull women in
London to my parties?” (MD 105) After Richard leaves to go to a Committee on
Albanians, or Armenians—she cannot remember which—she thinks, “no, she
could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her
roses (didn’t that help the Armenians?)” (MD 106).

However, Woolf promotes an intersectional understanding of society by
acknowledging the injustice of Peter’s and Kilman’s socioeconomic statuses
while simultaneously suggesting that they try to invade the “privacy of the
soul” through other means (MD 111). Despite his economic dependence on
others—he admits that “it was true he would have, some time or other, to see
whether Richard couldn’t help him to some job” (MD 43)—Peter exemplifies
the oppressive effects of male privilege and heteronormative systems. He is a
self-proclaimed lover of women, admitting that he “liked…above all women’s
society” (MD 140). Most of his thoughts and actions in the novel concentrate
on chasing or fantasizing about members of the opposite sex. For example,
after Peter leaves Clarissa’s house, an “extraordinarily attractive” young woman
catches his eye (MD 45). He imagines her as “the very woman he had always
had in mind,” and, “stealthily fingering his pocket-knife,” follows her for several
blocks (MD 45). The pocket-knife, a phallic symbol that Woolf consistently
associates with his character, combined with his decision to follow and idealize
this woman, highlights Peter’s oppressive tendencies, his sexual forwardness,
and his extreme masculinity.
These aspects of Peter’s personality affect Clarissa in devastating ways: her decision to adopt the persona of “the perfect hostess” ultimately coincides with Peter’s intrusion on her sexual privacy. He interrupts “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” (MD 30): her kiss with Sally Seton, an interruption Clarissa feels was “like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!” (MD 30) Excepting the novel’s conclusion, Clarissa’s relationship and kiss with Sally constitute her only moments of complete sincerity and intimacy. As Emily Jensen notes, it is in response to this intrusion that “Clarissa agrees to deny her love for Sally Seton, decides marriage to Peter Walsh is impossible, and chooses instead to marry Richard Dalloway and become respectable” (Jensen 162). Clarissa’s “hard” persona, then, stems from an encounter with an oppressor.

Woolf reinforces this point when Peter intrudes on Clarissa’s privacy on the day the novel takes place, paralleling his intrusion on her kiss with Sally. The narrator describes their interaction here as a sexualized battle. As Peter again wields his phallic knife, Clarissa “tak[es] up her needle” (MD 38), an image of domesticity and, as the critic Beverly Ann Schlack notes, the means through which she mends the tear in her dress and symbolically maintains the “virginity...which clung to her like a sheet” (MD 26). Thus the passage suggests Clarissa’s reluctance to engage sexually with men while characterizing Peter as the oppressive force that tries to make her do so. Clarissa describes herself here as “a Queen whose guards had fallen asleep and left her unprotected...so that any one can stroll in and have a look at her” (MD 38, emphasis mine). Peter threatens Clarissa sexually and emotionally, and she responds by labeling him an “enemy” (MD 38).

It is not surprising, then, that Clarissa rejects Peter and marries Richard Dalloway instead. She states that “with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable” (MD 5); she prefers Richard because he allows the “gulf” between married people to remain, “a solitude... that one must respect... for one would not part with it oneself or take it, against his will, from one’s husband, without losing one’s independence, one’s self respect” (MD 105). Unlike Peter, Richard allows Clarissa her “attic room” and does not threaten her “virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet” (MD 26).

That Peter interprets himself and Clarissa differently only reinforces the notion that Woolf possessed and meant to evoke a nuanced understanding of privilege. Peter sees Clarissa as a woman he passionately loved who treated him with unwarranted coldness: she is “hard” but irresistible (MD 46), in possession of “that woman’s gift, of making a world of her own wherever she happened to be” (MD 66). He believes that “[h]is relations with Clarissa... had spoilt his life” (MD 170), and although he admits that “[h]is demands upon Clarissa... were absurd” (MD 55) on the day the novel takes place, he repeatedly fails to recognize how his male privilege blinds him to the realities of Clarissa’s experience as a woman.
A similar contest of narratives takes place between Clarissa and Miss Kilman. Miss Kilman detests Clarissa, thinking, “she came from the most worthless of all classes—the rich, with a smattering of culture” and that “she should have been in a factory; behind a counter, Mrs. Dalloway and all the other fine ladies!” (MD 108-109). Unjustly fired during the war because “she would not pretend that the Germans were all villains” (109), she is “degradingly poor” and feels that “she had a perfect right to anything that the Dalloways did for her” because “[s]he had been cheated” (MD 108). Her poverty makes her justifiably “bitter and burning” (MD 109), and she interprets Clarissa’s attitude towards her as a “condescending” flaunting of wealth and social status (MD 108).

However, Miss Kilman also fantasizes about achieving “a religious victory” over Clarissa; she wants to make her “soul and its mockery... feel her mastery” (MD 110), words which echo the sentiments of the narrative’s most powerful figures of oppression: Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw. Clarissa thinks that she represents “[l]ove and religion!...[t]he cruellest things in the world... seeing them clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous, dressed in a mackintosh coat, on the landing” (MD 111). Although Clarissa overlooks the role class plays in their interactions, she rightly believes that Kilman uses “love and religion” to “destroy... the privacy of the soul,” and reacts to her with hostility for that reason (MD 111).

As evident from her relationship with Miss Kilman, Clarissa is privileged, not “morally obtuse.” Her behavior towards Ellie Henderson coincides with her desire to appear as the wealthy, upper-class wife during a party attended by the Prime Minister. However, Woolf emphasizes that this is still cruel and suggests that Ellie is acutely aware of Clarissa’s reluctance to invite her. Her statement concerning Armenians and roses highlights her privileged views, although it is curiously echoed by Sally and Peter. Peter says twice in the novel that he “prefer[s] men to cauliflowers” (MD 1, 171), while at the party Sally states that she “got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her” (MD 171). That these sentiments correlate with gender may suggest that intimacy is a freedom belonging largely to men, who have less to lose from it. Although Clarissa’s reasoning is simplistic, the narrative supports her notion that Parliament cannot help the poor. At her party, she hears Dr. Bradshaw telling Richard that “[t]here must be some provision in the Bill” about “the deferred effects of shell shock” in light of Septimus’ “case” (MD 162). Bradshaw only acts to increase his power over others, never to help them. Clarissa’s wealth limits, but does not erase, her ability to grasp the realities of others outside her class; although she knows that Parliament is useless, her “roses” are hardly a viable alternative.

To protect her privacy, Clarissa divides herself into two parts: one that conveys the characteristics of “the perfect hostess” to others and accounts for her coldness; and the rich, vibrant personality Woolf provides the reader with insight into through her use of free indirect discourse and depiction of Clarissa’s thoughts. By adopting a persona, Clarissa becomes wholly incapable
of intimacy: she avoids Sally, repeatedly declining invitations to visit her, and when Richard seems about to tell her he loves her, she thinks, “What? Why? There were the roses” (MD 105). The arrogance that coincides with her persona seeps into her thoughts and impulses, as seen in her privileged viewpoints. These constitute real problems in Clarissa’s character which she must confront before the novel’s conclusion. However, the reader knows that where others see foolishness in, for example, Clarissa’s parties, she sees “an offering; to combine, to create”; to her, they are “a gift” (MD 107). Despite her failings, Woolf insists that she is far more complex than she appears.

Septimus’ class and his mental disability exacerbate his difficulties and differentiate him from Clarissa; however, they share similar struggles that stem from the same oppressive structures. Septimus suffers from patriarchal systems that define and categorize men as much as they do women. Before the war, he was an imaginative and inquisitive young man interested in literature and eager for greatness: he was full of “vanity, ambition, idealism, passion, loneliness, courage, laziness, the usual seeds, which all muddled up...made him shy, and stammering, and anxious to improve himself, made him fall in love with Miss Isabel Pole, lecturing in the Waterloo Road upon Shakespeare” (MD 74). He enlists “to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress” (MD 75). However, during the war, “he developed manliness” (MD 75), and after his best friend Evans dies, he realizes with terror that “he could not feel” (MD 76). As Lee R. Edwards notes, “[h]ow odd that what a man is should not be sufficient to define him as a man” (Edwards 105). His society’s expectations of masculinity destroy his ability to express his emotions; and, as Edwards writes, “the world of culture... which had served Septimus by giving his imagination form died in the War and can now exert itself only as part of the paraphernalia of madness” (Edwards 105). He sees phantoms, has visions, and cannot convey his reality to anyone. Septimus does not divide himself or adopt a persona as Clarissa does, and his obvious madness leaves him more vulnerable to those who would “force his soul.”

While Clarissa contends with those who intrude on “the privacy of [her] soul,” Septimus must face the only characters unambiguously labeled as oppressive and cruel: Dr. Holmes and Dr. Bradshaw, who are inhuman in their merciless silencing of people like Septimus. In the novel, they represent the pinnacle of repression and power. It is they whom Clarissa accuses of wanting to “force your soul” (MD 163), and it is they whom the narrator directly condemns when she charges them with worshipping the goddesses Proportion—which through Bradshaw “made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair” (MD 87)—and Conversion, who “feasts on the wills of the weakly” and “offers help, but desires power” (MD 88). The religious language here parallels that used to describe Miss Kilman, who is also guilty of the crime of conversion. These men are, however, far more menacing: it is ultimately the threat of Holmes and Bradshaw “forcing his soul” that causes Septimus to kill himself. Before doing so, he exclaims, “[s]o he was in their power! Holmes and Bradshaw were on him! The brute with the red nostrils was
snuffing into every secret place!” (MD 130) These characters invade Septimus’ privacy, just as Peter and Miss Kilman invade Clarissa’s.

In addition to these more tangible similarities that exist between Clarissa and Septimus, Woolf constructs a symbolic connection between these two characters through her style. Repeated phrases saturate this novel, but Clarissa’s and Septimus’ consciousnesses overlap in ways that can only be described as uncanny. For example, Woolf employs the same imagery when both characters meditate on death; at the very beginning of the novel, Clarissa thinks,

She remembered once throwing a shilling into the Serpentine. But every one remembered; what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab. Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; 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, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met, being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. But what was she dreaming as she looked into Hatchards’ shop window? What was she trying to recover? What image of white dawn in the country, as she read in the book spread open:

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun
Nor the furious winter’s rages. (MD 6-7)

This passage introduces several themes essential to understanding both the relationship between Clarissa and Septimus and the mechanism behind the novel’s thematic climax. Clarissa’s suspicion that, in death, a part of her survives “on the ebb and flow of things” and is shared with “the trees” ties her directly to Septimus and characterizes death as a fundamentally communicative act.

Woolf uses the allusion to Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, first encountered in the passage above, throughout the novel in connection with these two characters. The lines are part of a dirge sung over a woman dressed as a man who appears, but is not actually, dead. Therefore, the allusion connotes distortion of identity and suggests both a living death and resurrection. The dirge begins,

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,
Nor the furious winter’s rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,

As chimney-sweepers, come to dust. (Cymbeline 4.2.258-263)

Although different significations associated with these lines are emphasized in different places, the lines ultimately insist that death should be envisioned as a release and thus should not be feared. Life consists of toil and suffering— suggested by “heat o’ the sun” and “furious winter’s rages”—while death results
in freedom. Woolf’s characterization of death as an act of communication, a type of preservation, and a path to freedom introduced in the passage above is a vital part of the novel’s primary thematic concerns.

Woolf evokes similar images in relation to Septimus while he is trapped within the throes of madness. Septimus feels in the present an acute version of Clarissa’s imaginings concerning death. He thinks,

Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men? It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, 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 back in his chair... the earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head. (MD 59)

The image of his fleshless body as it becomes one with the natural world—“spread like a veil upon a rock” as “[r]ed flowers” grow “through his flesh”—evokes the image of Clarissa “being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches.” Septimus’ madness allows his mind to occasionally free itself from the constraints of society and even from the body, thus he feels a communion with nature and the dead—as seen in his repeated visions of Evans—that Clarissa hopes for only in death. Because Septimus is still living and is thus subjected to social and physical limitations whether he recognizes it or not, his connection to this communal, spiritual world is tenuous at best.

Woolf parallels Septimus’ and Clarissa’s thoughts to highlight the shared effects of oppression on both characters. When Clarissa is sewing right before Peter bursts in on her, she thinks,

So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying “that is all” more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (MD 33-34)

This metaphor evokes Clarissa’s split sense of identity, the result of her reaction to oppressive forces. Her “body alone” acknowledges “the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking,” which are images and sounds that suggest activity and daily life. Meanwhile, her heart, declaring “[t]hat is all” and “[f]ear no more,” releases “its burden to some sea,” which suggests a total relinquishment of the spirit to an ethereal, eternal presence. Beverly Ann Schlack observes that the allusion to Cymbeline in the context of this metaphor implies that this relinquishment is comparable to a kind of death, and highlights Clarissa’s fascination with and occasional attraction to death: characteristics she shares with Septimus. Clearly, it also reinforces Woolf’s suggestion that death is a peaceful and even liberating process. The image of the sun, as Marilyn Schauer Samuels
notes, works with the *Cymbeline* allusion to suggest Clarissa’s fear of death and her fear of the reality of life, qualities again mirrored in Septimus’ story.

Septimus has these same thoughts before he regains lucidity, helps Rezia make a hat, and then commits suicide. Woolf writes, “[e]very power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more” (*MD* 123). The repetition here is remarkable. As with Clarissa, these thoughts appear before an oppressor, Dr. Holmes, tries to enter the room. The *Cymbeline* allusion combines with the image of the sun to suggest Septimus’ reentrance into activity and life and to foreshadow his steadily approaching death. Therefore, the passage highlights the result of Septimus’ fight against oppression—his suicide—as it does with Clarissa. That Septimus’ heart and body together proclaim “fear no more,” while Clarissa remains divided in that declaration, highlights Septimus’ greater unity of being throughout the narrative and correlates with the action of the story: Septimus, not Clarissa, experiences death. As evident from these parallel passages, the connection between these two characters cannot be attributed merely to Woolf’s style or her need to make the narrative cohere; it is mysterious, symbolic, and relentlessly reinforced.

Clearly, Woolf constructed a solid basis for the novel’s thematic climax. Returning to this pivotal scene, Woolf brings together the implications of Clarissa’s and Septimus’ parallel struggles against oppression and their more spiritual connection. Clarissa’s meditations initially consist of insights and comparisons possible only when two people share daily struggles. She thinks,

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wrenched 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. (*MD* 163)

Clarissa’s recollection that “[s]he had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine” connects this passage with her meditations on death at the beginning of the novel, when she envisioned it as an act of sharing oneself. Clarissa immediately realizes that, while she allows part of herself to “let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter” by adopting a persona, Septimus successfully “preserve[s]” his integrity and autonomy by killing himself. Notions of “defiance,” “communication,” and “an embrace” are found in the passage narrating Septimus’ death: when he flings himself out of the window, he boldly shouts, “I’ll give it you!”; before he does so, he thinks, “[i]t was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia’s (for she was with him),” which connotes...
the intimacy evoked by the word “embrace”; finally, the image of the window implies communication (MD 132). Clarissa’s acute awareness of these concepts involved in Septimus’ suicide, combined with her intuitive understanding of the implications it has for herself, suggests that death does allow both characters a path to communion that had “mystically evaded them” throughout the novel.

Clarissa then wonders, “this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure?” (MD 163). The word “treasure,” often associated with Septimus, suggests the integrity of the soul. Clarissa describes her kiss with Sally as if it were a treasure: “she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious” (MD 30). As stated previously, her passionate love for Sally represents her most sincere moment, when she was capable of intimacy, an ability which has since been obscured because of figures like Peter Walsh. Woolf solidifies the association between this moment and Septimus’ “treasure” when Clarissa recalls the allusion to Shakespeare’s Othello, “[i]f it were now to die, ’twere now to be most happy” (MD 163), first stated in relation to this love affair. Clarissa correctly believes Septimus has kept something of this magnitude in killing himself that she has lost in living.

Her kiss with Sally is inextricably linked to Peter’s interruption of it; thus Clarissa’s thoughts shift to the oppressive Dr. Bradshaw. She finds him “obscurely evil...capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul” (MD 163). She rightfully imagines Septimus as one of “the poets and thinkers” and proposes that “if this young man had gone to him, and Sir William had impressed him, like that, with his power, might he not then have said (indeed she felt it now) Life is made intolerable; they make life intolerable, men like that?” (MD 163).

This leads Clarissa into a confrontation with her privilege and its consequences. Becoming “the perfect hostess” as a means of protection was possible only because of her class. She declares it “her disaster—her disgrace...her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman...and she forced to stand here in her evening dress” (MD 164). Her attempt to gain security through taking advantage of her privilege benefits people like Bradshaw, however indirectly; thus she sees herself as complicit in Septimus’ suicide.

Clarissa’s acknowledgment of her relation to Septimus, combined with recognition of her privilege, is redemptive. She “had never been so happy. Nothing could be slow enough, nothing last too long. No pleasure could equal...this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, with a shock of delight” (MD 164). She has rediscovered “herself,” who she was during “the triumphs of youth” when she received her own treasure and could be honest with another person.

Woolf suggests a transcendent act of communication with and discovery of Septimus when Clarissa looks out of her window and sees “in the room opposite the old lady star[ing] straight at her!” (MD 164) Windows and rooms have symbolic significance; they suggest the mysterious and private part of another.
For example, Clarissa states earlier that “the supreme mystery which Kilman might say she had solved, or Peter might say he had solved, but Clarissa didn’t believe either of them had the ghost of an idea of solving, was simply this: here was one room; there another” (*MD* 112). Thus they signify what Septimus and Clarissa labored to guard from oppressive characters like Peter, Holmes, or Bradshaw, who literally and figuratively try to intrude on these rooms without consent. That Septimus leaps out of a window suggests an act communicating this self, and Clarissa and the old woman’s ability to see each other for the first time indicates the act of transcending barriers and peering into and achieving communion with another’s private world. Despite their differences, Clarissa has successfully comprehended Septimus’ communicative act; thus *Mrs. Dalloway* stands as a testament to the power of human communication and its ability to transcend the barriers created by oppressive institutions.

Like many of the novel’s other passages, Clarissa’s revelations end with the striking of the clock. Woolf writes,

> The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came back 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 while they went on living. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room. (*MD* 165)

She does not and should not pity Septimus because he successfully preserved his “treasure,” the integrity of his soul. His death was *not* his and Rezia’s idea of tragedy, nor is it Clarissa’s. The allusion to *Cymbeline* repeated here after coming to terms with life and death implies that she no longer fears the entire human experience. The phrase “the leaden circles dissolved in the air,” which in the novel typically follows the striking of the clock, reminds the reader that her life will continue. Because Clarissa has now rediscovered in herself the integrity Septimus never lost, her feelings of relation to him seem especially appropriate.

Woolf’s symbolism and stylistic structuring of the narrative characterizes Septimus’ suicide in and of itself as a fundamentally communicative act: death is not merely an “end”; it is also an implementation of human freedom that allows one unity with man and nature. However, if Clarissa’s reception of Septimus’ suicide is to be judged sincere—and thus, if the novel itself is to be taken seriously—the reader must be willing to acknowledge each character in the narrative as both oppressed and oppressor; concurrently, he or she must recognize that even these two labels together cannot adequately describe the sum total of their being. It would, then, be worthwhile to consider the ethical implications of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Ultimately, Woolf’s complex and subtle portrayal of individuals living within a hierarchical social world, which I have described as a representation of the implications of intersectionality theory,
extends beyond merely a method of narrative structuring; it challenges the reader to expand their sympathies to characters like Clarissa who initially appear undeserving of them. If the reader is receptive to Woolf’s suggestions, he or she is allowed a vision of the novel’s characters that is comparable to the vision with which Clarissa is provided at the novel’s climax.

I do not think it unreasonable to suggest that Woolf intended to persuade her readers to apply this attitude outside of the context of reading the novel. She seems to advocate a moral approach to others that insists on accounting for their perspectives, and thus actively resists rigid categorization or definition of them; at the same time, the fact that Clarissa must confront her privilege before the novel’s conclusion implies that one should be willing to recognize oneself as an oppressor and actively work to challenge that. Although I would not go so far as to say that, if this outlook were implemented on a wider scale in society, it would afford everyone a view of others as profound as the one Woolf attributes to Clarissa through her symbolism—it appears that death is an instrumental part of that—the novel convincingly suggests that it would promote a more sincere, more empathetic world that embraces, rather than silences, men like Septimus and celebrates, rather than represses, women like Clarissa.

*Mrs. Dalloway* presents a sweeping vision of the difficulties faced by individuals attempting to live with, and relate to, others in modern society. It provides not only an intense examination and criticism of that society, but also an argument for the power of the individual to overcome the barriers put in place by it. Through a careful control of stylistic devices, Woolf connects two disparate characters: Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith. To protect herself from oppressive forces, Clarissa adopts a persona, and although she maintains her privacy, she jeopardizes her integrity. Septimus commits suicide and preserves both. Through his death, he communicates himself and redeems Clarissa, allowing her to reconnect with the part of her soul marred by societal institutions. Therefore, the last lines, in which the narrator defines Clarissa as a whole rather than as a combination of parts, are especially appropriate:

- What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? [Peter] thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?
- It is Clarissa, he said.
- For there she was. (*MD* 172)
Works Cited


