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Sexuality in *Mrs. Dalloway*

In her book, *Mrs. Dalloway,* Virginia Woolf follows a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway. A major theme in the novel is female repression under the patriarchy. This repression is seen in many ways throughout the text, but a clear representation is seen through Clarissa’s suppressed sexuality. In this research paper, I will discuss the ways in which Woolf uses sexuality as a vehicle to call out the patriarchy, specifically the institution of marriage within the patriarchy.

Before I begin textual analysis, it is necessary to discuss the features of the modern British novel from the years 1890-1930. These novels are characterized with a major shift from realistic to expressionist writing. In other words, authors during this time period wrote more subjective, self-expressive novels (Schwarz 19). One way in which modern British novels achieved an expressionist style is the use of stream of consciousness, where a character’s thoughts, reactions, and emotions are depicted in a continuous manner. In this way, writers, such as Virginia Woolf, were able to isolate their characters from social community by “focusing on the perceiving psyche” (Schwarz 20). Since characters of the modern British novel were often versions of the author, due to the non-traditional closeness of the writer and character, the experience and self-consciousness of the characters oftentimes reflect that of the author.

Woolf herself is known to have belonged to a group of intellectuals known as the “Bloomsbury Group.” And while the group was famous for its liberal political and artistic contexts, it is also criticized for its predominance of male members, sexism, and elitism (Simpson 6). Nevertheless, the Bloomsbury Group offered Woolf a space to exercise creativity and form new perspectives on sociopolitical issues. Her opinions on patriarchal traditions are largely formed from her own experience. While Woolf did indeed marry, she is known to have had homosexual relations with several women such as Vita Sackville-West, Ethyl Smyth, and Madge Vaughan (Simpson 22). Following the form of the modern British novel, Woolf used her own life as inspiration to create female characters who suffered from patriarchal repression in terms of gender roles and sexuality.

Virginia Woolf, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, seems to have created the character Clarissa Dalloway as a reflection of herself; her purpose being to call out the traditions of the patriarchy and the ways it can potentially suppress individuals and their happiness. In this essay, I will examine the ways in which Clarissa’s sexuality is hindered by the patriarchal society, and the effects this hinderance has on her private life.

The first scene I will analyze is the introduction of Sally Seton. Allowed a look inside Clarissa’s memories, readers are immediately informed of the love she held for Sally. “Take Sally Seton, had that not been love? She had a distinct recollection of saying to the man she was with, ‘Who is *that?”* and he had told her […] But all that evening she could not take her eyes off Sally.” (Woolf 33). While some readers have speculated that her feelings for Sally are merely an innocent childhood phase (Haffey 138), the frequency with which Clarissa thinks back to Sally seems to indicate her homosexuality. The first line of the excerpt suggests that adult Clarissa reflects on her time with Sally as love. Because adult reflection on childhood memories tends to be more rational and introspective, this admission points to the relationship being more than a childhood fascination.

Clarissa’s infatuation with Sally is further elucidated in her memories. Readers learn that Clarissa falls in love with Sally for more than just her beauty, but also for her “extravagance, courage, and rebellion,” (Harrison 8). Unlike Clarissa, Sally is not afraid to challenge traditional rules of etiquette. This behavior can be seen in Sally’s stemless flower arrangements – the creativity of placing flower bulbs in bowls has been interpreted as a reflection of alternative sexualities, certainly undermining patriarchal expectations (Harrison 10). Besides her cosmopolitan flower arrangements, Sally also ran around the house naked, smoked cigars, bicycled on the terrace, and left Papa’s book in the rain (Woolf 35). Woolf’s descriptions of Sally in this passage are interesting calls against the patriarchy. For example, leaving Papa’s book in the rain has been interpreted as “disregarding the words and symbols of male power” (Harrison 8).

In addition to describing her attraction to Sally, Clarissa also informs readers of kiss shared between the two women. The kiss, as Clarissa describes, was “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” (Woolf 35). Again, we see a reflection of adult Clarissa on a moment from her childhood. Years after the kiss takes place, she still sees the kiss with Sally as the most exquisite moment – leading that moment to be a valuable one for both Clarissa and the reader. When the kiss is interrupted by the return of Peter Walsh and Joseph Breitkopf, we see Clarissa’s harsh response: “It was like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!” (Woolf 36). Clarissa’s emotions here seem to reflect the men’s intrusion as a form of homosexual suppression – shocking and horrible, but also inevitable.

Indeed, Clarissa’s desire for women was repressed as she continued following public, patriarchal expectations. Choosing to live her public life in a manner considered respectable, Clarissa marries Richard Dalloway. This choice gives her both social success and economic security; however, it forces her to refuse the happiness that other suitors may have offered her. One potential suitor was Peter Walsh; who Clarissa rejects for fear of his passion. Woolf characterizes Clarissa as one who is sexually unresponsive to men, which is supported by the fact that Clarissa sleeps alone in a secluded attic.

The second potential suitor for Clarissa was equally as frightening to pursue, due to the social taboos of homosexuality. While Clarissa does not seem to be aroused by men, she certainly feels intense emotion towards Sally. Writer Elizabeth Meese quotes that feminine sexuality is at the site of rebellion, stating “as appropriated objects of men, we seek to disturb the system of patriarchal control through acts of sexual defiance” (Meese 117). Therefore, Clarissa’s restraint from pursuing Sally – a woman she clearly loves – reflects the immense influence of patriarchal expectations. Clarissa is then forced to reject her own homosexuality and emotions.

As a result of her marriage to Richard Dalloway, Clarissa suffers from loneliness. Her sexuality being repressed to a point of frigidity, she begins throwing parties in an effort to make social connections. Readers know that Clarissa’s parties are merely attempts at superficial relationships from Peter Walsh’s description of her characteristics: “Her courage, her social instinct; he admired her power of carrying things through. ‘The perfect hostess,’ he said to her, whereupon she winced all-over” (Woolf 62). The phrase “perfect hostess” being used as an insult to Clarissa indicate her opposition to the patriarchy. Under patriarchal expectations, women were to marry men and forgo opportunities to pursue exciting careers or hobbies outside of gender norms.

It is interesting, then, that Clarissa did end up as a wife who frequently throws parties. The willingness to accept the personal limitations of her role in both domestic and social spheres allows Clarissa at least some access to practice creativity (Ronchetti 51). Many critics have related Clarissa’s creativity with her homosexuality. Audre Lorde describes the term ‘erotic’ as the creative energy that empowers the lifeforce of women (Barrett 122). Using this definition of erotic in application to Clarissa’s parties, we begin to understand that because of her homosexuality, Clarissa is able to create not just a party, but art. Therefore, Woolf shapes Clarissa as a woman who is able to use her suppressed homosexuality as a vehicle for creativity. Furthermore, because her parties have become a refined artform, it calls to question the amount of untapped potential Clarissa has due to oppressive patriarchal traditions.

When Clarissa and Sally meet later in the novel, Clarissa describes Sally saying, “her voice was wrung of its old ravishing richness; her eyes not aglow as they used to be […] she had married, quite unexpectedly” (Woolf 181). Here, we see Woolf paralleling the repression Clarissa suffers due to her patriarchal marriage with Sally’s. Her loss of creative energy and sexual passion seems to be directly tied to Sally’s marriage, rather than her age. The re-introduction of Sally as an adulth can therefore be seen as a reassertion of heterosexual romance being suppressed by a social imperative that brings with it a loss of creativity and potential, but not a denial of eroticism (Harrison 10).

Looking at the functions of homosexuality throughout *Mrs. Dalloway* as a whole, one can detect the expressionist features of the modern British novel. Woolf, a homosexual writer, likely experienced many hinderances on her creativity due to censorship and suppression from patriarchal traditions. Clarissa being a reflection of Woolf’s own life, therefore serves as a character who criticizes the ways marriage and other traditions of a patriarchal society repress women and their sexuality.

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