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Septimus Warren Smith - A Timeless Reflection of Mental Illness in the Modern World

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Abstract: The work by Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, goes beyond the time involved in life because it also captures a shell-shocked soldier named Septimus Warren Smith, who is trying to overcome the mental effects of war. Septimus being alone echoes the stigmatising attitude toward mental illness and shows the necessity of education and awareness in the fight against prejudice. Woolf uses her own experiences with mental illness to depict Septimus as real and psychologically complex, and she breaks the social conventions of her era. His dramatic suicide is an eye-opener, a reminder to move away from dehumanising grouping schemes and more towards an empathetic acknowledgement of human pain. This paper employs critical theory and textual analysis to demonstrate how the story of Septimus can be utilised to make lasting contributions to contemporary discourse on mental health. It also addresses the influence of neoliberal ideas on the social definition and reaction to mental health problems.

Keywords: Mental Health, Stigma, Empathy, Societal Trauma, Neoliberalism.

Introduction

In the book *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, readers are transported beyond just a day in London as they explore the darkest depths of insanity through the tormented mind of Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus is a veteran of World War I who was entangled with shell shock and has intangible combat damages that lead to paranoia, hallucinations, and devastating anxiety (Myers, 2011). As an experimental, misunderstood artist,

he is shown as embodying all the horrible events of the First World War, leaving an enduring mark on his soul as severe as the wounds from artillery. Woolf adeptly employs the stream-of-consciousness technique to portray Septimus's disjointed mental state, allowing readers to comprehend his reality fully. The remark, "The throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body," demonstrates his decline into despair, which was exacerbated by criticism and loneliness (Woolf 13). His encounters with the medical community, which are characterised by "compassion and understanding," provide light on the period's cultural illiteracy. In an attempt to return to normal after suffering from shell shock after the loss of his companion, Evans, Septimus discovers that he has lost the capacity for feeling anything (Outka, 2013). Turay stressed that Septimus's tragic destiny serves as a warning against ignoring mental health issues. Even though Mrs. Dalloway was published more than a century ago, it is nevertheless relevant to readers today. Mental illness stigma is still a problem, which emphasises how important education and understanding are. By depicting Septimus as an outsider who feels disconnected from the world, the novel highlights the profound impact that discrimination and silence have on individuals. As a call to action, Woolf's analysis of her challenging journey inspires everyone to strive toward a society that recognises, embraces, and supports those dealing with mental illness.

Woolf tells the reader through Septimus's story: "We think we know people," reflects Clarissa Dalloway, "but we don't" (Woolf 24). This firm quote supports the larger message of the novel regarding the boundaries of human knowledge and the unseen wars that people fight, especially the people living with mental illness. The inner struggle of Septimus is concealed from other people, showing how a simple society can neglect the fate of the mind. Through his sensitive, yet profound introduction of his tragedy, Woolf motivates readers to develop a sense of empathy and to abandon shallow judgments. The narrative turns into an appeal to a kinder world in which mental illness is recognised and comprehended, and is dealt with not in stigmatised ways.

Woolf's Individual Reverberations in the Tale of Septimus

Virginia Woolf creates a very intimate depiction of Septimus' mental illness in Mrs. Dalloway by drawing on her own experiences with bipolar disorder. Woolf's deep comprehension of her battles with hallucinations, paranoia, and crippling anxiety demonstrates that her genuineness goes well beyond simple portrayal. Woolf

emphasises the challenge of communicating mental illness in her essay “On Being Ill,” pointing out that those who suffer from it frequently feel alone in a world full of love and joy (Woolf 20). Woolf, however, breaks this quiet with Septimus, producing a sympathetic portrayal that resonates with readers.

The experience of Septimus extends beyond this anguish and evolves into a powerful allegory to convey general social misery. His frightening perception of Big Ben and the unjust ‘They’ (Woolf 79) is a potent allegory for his shell shock and the overall damage to the human psyche that the war has brought upon humanity. After World War I, Septimus is a symbol of social disarray and mass inability to confront and heal the atrocities.

To illustrate this relationship, Woolf exemplifies how society perceives mental illness. Besides his internal struggle, Septimus also faces a substantial measure of fear and ignorance in the people around him. His experiences with Dr. Warren and his antiquated treatment methods and ignorance of the depth of mental health underscore how poorly the collective society has addressed the complexity of mental health. Clarissa Dalloway, with her altruistic motives born of societal norms, does not fully realise the degree of suffering that Septimus is going through. The ramifications of the pervasive stigma are significant. Due to society’s rejection and ignorance, Septimus’s loneliness only makes his grief worse and ultimately leads to his untimely death (Pattison and Woolf, 1987). His narrative emphasises the dire consequences of disregarding mental health issues and the pressing need for compassion and understanding.

Even if Woolf’s bipolar disease is not exactly reflected in Septimus’s story, the themes of death and insanity suggest a strong emotional bond. Woolf could relate to both characters’ struggles with cultural expectations and ignorance. Dramatic comments, such as “Men must not cut down trees,” depict Septimus’s internal tensions. God is real. Change the world. Nobody kills because they detest. Make it known. The reference to Woolf (126) implies a desire for a more sympathetic and caring environment.

Separation and Septimus Mental Illness: Mrs. Dalloway’s Warren Smith

In *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, Septimus Warren Smith is portrayed as a man deeply affected by the horrors of World War I. A breakdown results from his unresolved trauma and repressed emotions, which detaches him from reality and draws attention to the social elements that exacerbate his loneliness. According

to Mariana et al., (2020), Woolf's critique of social conventions, ignorance of mental illness, and the negative consequences of disregarding mental health issues are reflected in Septimus's story.

Woolf used Septimus to illustrate how society compels people to fit into gender stereotypes, according to Levy (2010). Men are supposed to conform to a stereotype of masculinity and repress their feelings. Lucrezia's surprise at Septimus' tears highlight the detrimental impact of social conventions. Because of social pressure, Septimus feels even more alone, finds it harder to build genuine relationships, and has more mental suffering.

Septimus is an example of the underappreciation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or so-called shell shock, within the culture. When Lucrezia reflects, "There was nothing to be done," it becomes clear that his struggles are often misunderstood as weakness or insanity. The case was of shell shock (Woolf 130). This unawareness heightens the loneliness and stigma of Septimus, robbing him of the magnanimity and support he lacks.

The treatment that Septimus receives as a result of his isolation by society reinstates the sense of urgency when it comes to greater exposure and education regarding mental illness. Through his critical thinking, Woolf portrays his plight as that of an outsider who is misunderstood and alienated. His account is a compelling call to action and a wake-up call to how society neglects individuals. Ghalandari and Jamili (2014) cite how Septimus felt guilty due to the social pressure, highlighting how significant the impact of social expectations was on his mental health.

Woolf adopts the tragic fate of Septimus to ensure readers understand the effects of socioeconomic issues on mental issues and how relevant a more caring society would be. His experience illustrates the forced suffering of mentally ill people, which makes social change necessary. By inviting the readers to join Septimus, Woolf breaks stereotypes about mental illness and promotes a culture of acceptance and support of human beings like him.

Psychoanalytic Theory and Woolf's Mental Health Significance in the Present

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf is a nuanced commentary on mental illness that sheds light on the troubles of Septimus through the lens of psychoanalytic philosophy. This approach is applied more often by critics to understand the characters created by Woolf, realising how their past has influenced their current state

of affairs (Williams). In the modern era, this hypothesis about Septimus highlights the impact of gender stereotypes and societal expectations on his mental well-being.

The portrayal of Septimus, as depicted by Woolf, remains highly relevant in the modern era. His struggles are framed through the lens of class relations in the gender context, which entails the psychological discomfort that cultural norms can induce (Madden, 2018). A broader modernist view of society, where historical shifts influence individual convictions and societal issues, is reflected in this. As seen by the contradiction between sentimentality, tradition, and modernist innovation in her writing, Woolf addressed this issue.

Woolf is a prime example of a modernistic approach to literature, encouraging modern authors with her evocative language and perceptive depictions of historical, political, feminist, and medical themes. Due to her emphasis on individualism, alienation, and stream-of-consciousness, she can defy conventional narratives and societal norms, thereby reflecting contemporary experiences.

His deep sense of loneliness and want for escape are revealed in Septimus' inner monologue. "Nothing exists outside an individual except a state of mind" and "A desire for solace, for relief, for something outside these miserable pigmies" (Woolf 57). He becomes a symbol of the stresses of neoliberalism and its cultural effects, transcending the mere depiction of an unhappy marriage. Woolf takes issue with neoliberalism's dependence on doctors. Both Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway's disappointment after seeking solace from doctors serves as an example of this. This illustrates Woolf's disdain for the medical establishment and their ignorance of mental illness in her time (Joyes, 2008).

Woolf refrains from portraying Septimus' hardships in a way that would turn off readers. Caramagno draws attention to this deliberate choice, suggesting that a too straightforward representation could hinder empathy. This aligns with current views on mental health, which prioritize understanding and compassion over criticism (Aboud, 2023).

Woolf's perceptive portrayal of mental illness care in England during that era is influenced by her struggle with bipolar disorder. In the modern world, her emphasis on the importance of empathy for individuals facing mental health issues remains pertinent. Since Septimus's symptoms are pretty similar to those of PTSD, it highlights a contemporary perspective on mental illness that emphasises support and

empathy above stigma. His story aligns with the contemporary movement to recognise the complexity of mental health issues, particularly in light of ongoing conflicts (Metzl 112).

Going Beyond Individualism: The Impact of Septimus and Neoliberalism on Mental Health

Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway goes beyond a straightforward examination of mental illness to dig into Septimus's terrible path. It vehemently criticises the neoliberal philosophy that is gaining traction and how it has affected how society sees mental health. The limitations of individualistic approaches are highlighted in this piece, which also argues for a more collaborative and compassionate understanding of mental health through Septimus's experience.

Neoliberalism, whose influence began in the early 20th century, had a profound impact on Septimus's experience, emphasising the self and self-sufficiency. As sociologist Nikolas Rose claims, neoliberal focus on personal resiliency can lead to an increase in a lack of sympathy towards those struggling with mental health issues (Rose, 2018). Septimus best demonstrates this lack of empathy. His sense of isolation, although shown to cause immense suffering, indicates that society is not willing to endorse personal self-sufficiency. The implication of this self-seeking reaction is quietly condemned in Woolf's story.

Septimus lacks the support of his emotionally distant wife and a doctor who looks down on him, highlighting the failures of a society that prioritises the autonomy of the individual over the simple accountability of the masses. According to de Mul (2015), Woolf's depiction of Septimus prompts a reevaluation of the effectiveness of neoliberal methodologies in addressing the social aspects of mental health. The story of Septimus promotes a deeper understanding of mental health, as the health of the community and the impact of the social elements also matter.

Septimus has more problems than he does. His shell shock as a consequence of battle trauma is duplicated by the developed neoliberalism in the epoch in which he lived. Woolf specifically exposes neoliberal attitudes and histories of trauma in her narrative, exposing individualistic mental health practices, as suggested by Historian Brown (Brown, 1992). He is miserable because there are no services, and society does not understand mental health.

The case of Septimus serves as a wake-up call to avoid personal suffering in a broader societal context and to consider the shortsighted individualism that overlooks the group-level consequences of past events.

Septimus' untimely demise highlights the need for a coordinated and caring approach to mental health. According to academics, Woolf's story highlights the value of social ties and community support, calling for a review of mental health regulations (Murray 2008). The tale of Septimus challenges us to abandon self-serving fixes and adopt a comprehensive strategy that prioritizes empathy, shared responsibility, and the well-being of the community.

Taking Social Factors into Account for Mental Health

The terrible suicide of Septimus makes empathy and compassion necessary. Woolf emphasises people's innate humanity, challenging traditional norms around mental health. When Clarissa Dalloway muses over Septimus's passing, Woolf begins to doubt the emotions of ecstasy and fear. When Septimus says, "It's Clarissa," he owes his excitement to her (Woolf 180). The terrible destiny of Septimus is a moving critique of the way society at the time dealt with mental illness. The urgent need for a more sympathetic and informed approach to mental healthcare is highlighted by the medical community's lack of thorough understanding, reliance on antiquated practices, and lack of empathy.

The novel's broader significance is shown by Smith's assessment that "Woolf's storytelling captures the psychological devastation of an entire generation" (Smith 311). Woolf skillfully captured the intricacies of Septimus' mental state by utilising literary devices such as symbolism and stream-of-consciousness (Woolf 78). Woolf's story invites readers to consider the need for society to treat the underlying causes of mental illness. By connecting Septimus's journey with more general social ones, the book emphasises the value of a coordinated strategy in addressing mental health issues brought on by the aftermath of war. Woolf's attempts to encourage readers to recognise the social causes of mental illness and advocate for systemic reforms are highlighted by Bowen et al., (88).

Conclusion

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf is a classic and poignant exploration of insanity in the character of Septimus Warren Smith. Using her own experiences of bipolar disorder, Woolf builds an emotionally authentic, as well as socially critical, narrative. Septimus acts not only as a victim of the war but also as the signifier of a society that cannot understand the psychological trauma. His alienation, his hallucinations, and

his suicide are a criticism of the poor state of mental health facilities, social perception, and the defined gender rules of the era. The reader becomes immersed in the fractured mind of Septimus through Woolf's lyrical prose and stream-of-consciousness style, allowing a rare form of identification to bridge the gap between past and present in perceptions of mental health.

Instead of being a personal story, the experience of Septimus serves as a critique of neoliberal ideologies that emphasise atomised responsibility versus communal concern. His distress raises the issue of adverse impacts of social alienation, healthcare inattention, and institutional apathy. The focus of Woolf on the emotional bond, community solidarity, and stigma demystification of mental health remains relevant in the modern world, where mental illness continues to struggle with misrepresentation and a lack of attention. The story of Septimus necessitates a renewed commitment to cultural care, compassion, systematic change, and diverse mental healthcare.

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