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English 188T

13 May 2021

### **Gender and Identity in *Mrs. Dalloway***

A common theme in *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf is the struggle with identity. The characters each struggle with identity in different ways. This essay will specifically focus on Clarissa Dalloway and her identity struggles. There are two ways in which Clarissa struggles with her identity. The first way is in her marriage, she doesn't feel that she is her own person outside of her marriage. Clarissa Dalloway is searching for her own individual identity. In her essay, "The Problem That Has No Name: Female Identity and Autonomy in Chopin's *The Awakening* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*", Annalisa Brizuela compares the characters of Edna and Clarissa. "While both protagonists are artful when wielding their power of socialization, it is only through solitude that each character is able to acknowledge her pursuit of a new identity and individual autonomy." (Brizuela, 11). This is something that Clarissa realizes she needs to find outside of her marriage. "She has the oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway." (Woolf 10). This thought of Clarissa comes after she speaks of Lady Bexborough, who Clarissa views as someone who knows who she is. And while this quote leads the reader to believe that Clarissa knew who she was before her marriage, the reader soon finds out that this is not the only way in which Clarissa struggles with her identity.

Clarissa also struggles with her sexuality. She is unsure of what it means about her. Throughout the novel, Clarissa admires different women but is also still concerned about Peter Walsh. "She would have been, in the first place, dark like Lady Bexborough, with a skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes. She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like a man; with a country house; very dignified, very sincere. Instead of which she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's. That she held herself well was true; and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well, considering that she spent little. But often now this body she wore (she stopped to look at a Dutch picture), this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing-nothing at all." (Woolf 10).

Clarissa is admiring Lady Bexborough in more than one way here, she admires her physique as well as her strong personality, to be interested in men's topics publicly. Clarissa compares herself to Lady Bexborough and immediately realizes that she falls short. Through Clarissa's musing, it is clear that she is struggling with how she feels and is unsure of it. "And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident-like a faint scent, or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sounds at certain moments), she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check, and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which spilled its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores!" (Woolf 31). There is also another woman Clarissa loves, Sally. "But this question of love (she thought, putting her coat away), this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love?" (Woolf 32). Clarissa is pondering if what she felt for Sally was love. She continues

on to think about Sally. “Sally’s power was amazing, her gift, her personality. There was her way with flowers, for instance.” (Woolf 33). Clarissa is admiring this woman and seems to be in love with her. While this is going on, however, she is still concerned with Peter Walsh. “Never should she forget all that! Cold, heartless, a prude, he called her. Never could she understand how he cared. But those Indian women did presumably-silly, pretty, flimsy, nincompoops.” (Woolf 8).

In his essay, “‘I’ On The Run: Crisis Of Identity In Mrs. Dalloway”, Ban Wang talks about one other way in which Virginia Woolf presents an identity crisis. “*Mrs. Dalloway* provides a good occasion to investigate the connections between the symbolic network of power, the constitution of the subject, and the psychic resistance. The novel can be read not so much as a systematic penetration into individual consciousness as an exploration of the ways in which the individual tires or fails to establish his or her identity as the subject of the state.” (Wang 179). This idea is interesting because the reader is able to “hear” the stream of consciousness of the characters trying to place themselves on a social stance. The example that Wang uses is that of the car in the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway* where the characters all wonder who is in the car and how this affects them. Suzanne Brown agrees with this statement. In her essay, “The Divided Woman: Identity and Social Systems in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Mrs. Dalloway*” Suzanne Brown says, “*Mrs. Dalloway* explores the manner in which one constructs identity and its difference in the public and private spheres.” (Brown, 21).

The struggle of identity is evident throughout this entire novel. Many characters struggle with identity, however Clarissa struggles in more than one aspect. This may speak to the human condition. We all struggle with identity.

**Works Cited**

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