



Class Consciousness and Social Hierarchy in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract

The work by Virginia Woolf Mrs Dalloway (1925) combines the consciousness of the individual with the strict division of the classes in post-World War I London. The novel shows the extent to which class identity runs in the psyche of each of the characters both the polished upper-class world of Clarissa Dalloway, and the outsider disenfranchised point of view of Septimus Warren Smith. Woolf reveals the unquestionably direct and indirect elements of how social hierarchy influences the thoughts and emotions of characters through stream-of-consciousness narration. The paper will present the argument that Woolf employs various approaches to the theme - in particular, the point of view of Clarissa and Septimus - to show that the boundaries of classes are internalised, and remain mostly invisible, at the same time shaping identity and relations to a large degree. Modern critics (e.g. Mary Madden) observe that Woolf regards class difference as an inspiring source of satire although she swings both ways between supporting and condemning class privilege. The characters in Mrs Dalloway, such as Clarissa, are portraying upper-class performance when personally struggling with its vacuity; Peter Walsh swings between being an insider and outsider; and the marginalisation and eventual suicide of Septimus, is a commentary on the non-responsiveness of the establishment. Antagonisms of classes are being emphasized even in Miss Kilman and the public spaces of a city. We find that the narrative by Woolf ends up revealing the deep rooted classism

that is all under the guise of the polite society and the criticism is one that will continue to be applied in the context of privilege and inequality.

Keywords:

Class Consciousness; Social Hierarchy; Virginia Woolf; Mrs Dalloway; Modernism; British Society; Privilege.

I. Introduction

Mrs Dalloway is a modernist novel set in London in 1923, focusing on the events of a single day. It features Clarissa Dalloway, a wealthy society hostess, and Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked war veteran, among others. Though the plot revolves around Clarissa's preparation for an evening party, Woolf's innovative narrative (stream-of-consciousness interior monologue) illuminates much more than social rituals. Central to the novel is class consciousness – the awareness of one's social position – and the entrenched social hierarchy of early-20th-century Britain. British society at this time was still highly stratified: despite the upheavals of World War I, aristocratic and upper-middle classes clung to Victorian values of lineage and privilege, even as the Labour movement began challenging them. In Mrs Dalloway, Woolf depicts this tension. For example, Clarissa's friend Lady Bruton and her Conservative circle insist on "old, outmoded traditions" (such as emigration schemes) even as the war's carnage should have upended their complacency. As one critic observes, "all the characters are still preoccupied with social class," from Clarissa's "snobbish" party invitations to the way the Prime Minister character embodies the old imperial order that "must be discarded".

Woolf herself was aware of her own class position. Mary Madden notes that, from the beginning of her career, Woolf moves "beyond the perspective of her inherited class position to challenge a damaging class system". Her Bloomsbury background (an upper-middle-class milieu) gave her education and connections, yet she also felt complicit in class biases and doubted the righteousness of privilege. In Mrs Dalloway, this ambivalence emerges: Woolf satirises her own class ("class difference [is] a fertile source of satire") even while showing how characters unconsciously reinforce it. Clarissa's polite surface, Septimus's "otherness," and even minor characters' grudges all point to internalised social order.

Thesis Statement: The intersecting inner views in the novel Mrs Dalloway are used to demonstrate how the structures of classes are internalised to an individual identity. Social status influences Clarissa, Peter, Septimus and others in their anxious perfection of the party by Clarissa, in her nervous outsider

position by Peter and in her bitter envy by Miss Kilman. The flowing story presented by Woolf helps the reader dive into the mind of each of the characters and see how the barriers between classes dictate the behavior and the self-view silently. The novel therefore serves to criticize the established British class system: despite the effort by the society to progress, characters cannot get rid of being brought up in a society that recognizes classes. In order to discuss these themes based on characters and settings, the paper will rely on the modern scholarship to explore how the class consciousness works in the text.

II. Historical and Social Context

Early 20th-century Britain was defined by a rigid class system. At its apex stood the aristocracy (dukes, earls, titled gentry), followed by the professional and landed classes, middle-class professionals, and the working class and poor at the bottom. Though the Edwardian era had begun to introduce modest social mobility, class identity remained nearly fixed. People's manners, education, work, and social networks were largely determined by birth. Strict codes of etiquette distinguished "well-born" people from commoners. For instance, only the wealthy could afford the leisure that allowed Anne Clarissa Dalloway to become a society hostess, whereas working-class characters could not enter such circles at all.

World War I (1914–1918) disrupted this hierarchy but did not immediately erase it. The war's mass casualties and social upheaval sowed disillusionment and gave common soldiers a temporary sense of equality at the front. Yet back home, the returning officers (often from middle-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds) found civilian society intact. As LitCharts notes, England "was technically victorious in the War, but hundreds of thousands of soldiers died and the country suffered huge financial losses." In Mrs Dalloway, Woolf shows how, despite this rupture, the English upper class "tried to cling to old, outmoded traditions and pretend that nothing had changed". The Countess, Lady Bruton, and their circles remain obsessed with imperial causes and social rank. Only hints (like references to the rising Labour Party) suggest shifts in power. Thus the war's impact appears largely emotional (trauma) rather than social: returning veterans like Septimus are shunted aside by a society eager to forget the horror, rather than being integrated or honored.

At home, the 1920s also saw emerging political and social tensions. The Conservative dominance was increasingly challenged by Labour and Liberal reforms. Women had won the vote in 1918 (for property-owning women) and 1928 (full suffrage), so shifting gender roles also play out in Woolf's novel. Clarissa, for instance, straddles traditional duties (a dutiful wife and hostess) and modern independence (she

pays for her own flowers, resists trivial conversation). Virginia Woolf, a feminist writer, often explored these changes. Alongside class, questions of gender inflect Mrs Dalloway: Clarissa's place in society is partly defined by marriage to an MP, yet she also yearns for the passionate equality she once felt with Sally Seton.

The origin of this criticism of class is in the background of Woolf, and in her Bloomsbury circle. Bloomsbury represented a community of artists and intellectuals who scorned Victorian class norms (e.g. E. M. Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Woolf herself) and were an avant-garde. Woolf was brought up in the upper-middle-class (her father was a well-known historian and her step-mother was a social climber), although she led an intellectual bohemian life as opposed to an aristocratic one. The critics mention that Woolf puts her own position of the class into the framework of the satire, that is, she ridicules and doubts the values she has inherited. But she was aware as well of privileges of learning and birth. This tension is created in the character of Mrs Dalloway as representatives of various classes play the same stage: Woolf appears to know she enjoys and challenges class at the same time. This is what one scholar concludes as the idea of class according to Woolf is not monolithic and crosses over to race and gender. Thus, her criticism is subtle: class is not presented as an absolute category and is a realm that is complicated by other identities. It is this complexity that underlies the novel's exploration of class: some characters such as Clarissa can be physically in an upper-class world but can be internally struggling to understand its boundaries, others (Kilman, Septimus) can be struggling to stay outside of it.

III. Clarissa Dalloway: Embodiment of Upper-Class Consciousness

Clarissa Dalloway is shown as the ideal English upper-class girl. During the day, she goes shopping to her party, and at night, she welcomes politicians, aristocrats, and London grand people in her refined house. Woolf demonstrates through Clarissa that social life is enacted by the high-society. Socially, the definition of Clarissa is superficially laid in terms of social performance and rituals. In the words of Peter Walsh (her former suit) Clarissa is the potential hostess and in fact Clarissa is proud of hearing guests awe at her clean rooms and sumptuous food. She puts the furniture in order very painstakingly (she is prepared to stop a minute and touch whoever entered the place must think how well, how light, how well-kept everything is) - every object of her party is a reference to rank. The role of a lady in the world of Mrs Dalloway is to fend off flirtation, make people feel jealous and strengthen social ties. Clarissa fills this role voluntarily, the party is, as she says, her ideal means of achieving her goal in life.

However, Woolf is quick to undercut the ease of social performance by revealing Clarissa's acute awareness of its artifice. In her private mind, Clarissa often perceives polite society as a mask. She reflects that her own public role – “being Mrs Dalloway” – makes her feel invisible and interchangeable. Early in the novel, Clarissa walks to buy flowers and thinks:

“She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown ... this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more”.

In this moment Woolf uses Clarissa's interior voice to show class consciousness: Clarissa feels her personal self has been swallowed by social identity. She exists not as Clarissa St. John Smith (her birth name), but only as the stately Mrs Richard Dalloway, whose public duties swallow personal nuance. Critic Iswarya notes that this thought “encapsulates her feeling of invisibility, as though her personal self has been consumed by social expectations”. Thus, Clarissa's upper-class consciousness includes the sense that one must always perform her assigned role – and that the “real” self lies buried under etiquette and appearances.

A. Social Performance and Identity

Clarissa's party is the chief symbol of her social identity. She prepares meticulously – ordering 240 bottles of wine, monitoring the maids, fretting over furniture – because the party is a statement of rank. Her husband Richard, a Conservative MP, is skeptical and finds her obsession trivial (“the whole of London embarking in little boats” from Peter's imagery), but Clarissa feels it is all-important: guests must see that her world is the epitome of English gentility. Scholar Marisa Charpentier observes that Clarissa's “public self conforms – ‘the perfect hostess,’ Peter Walsh once called her – even as her private, passionate self still thrives in solitude”. In other words, Clarissa's outer comportment is flawless by the standards of her class, but internally she feels a rich life of memories and desires bubbling up (her love for Sally Seton, her youthful daring). The very fact that Clarissa tries so hard to keep up appearances underscores how consumed she is by social surfaces: she wonders if behind every action she is performing for others' approval (“She does things not for themselves, but to make people think this or that,” as another commentator puts it).

This contrast of perfection of the surface, paying audience is used to emphasize the artificiality of a polite society that has been criticized. The party scene as perceived by Woolf is the demonstration of the upper class living in a type of spectacle. Everything in Clarissa must be clean, bright, beautifully looked after her thoughts regarding etiquette show her conditioning in classes. But the story too intimates the

emptiness beneath that gloss. The female character of Clarissa feels bored by the constant smiling and talking at times. The guests of the party do not actually discuss anything in earnest, they pass through rituals (mint julep in hand, talking about Fleet Street). This politeness is ridiculed in the scene: Charpentier points out that Helen Farr at a party engages in small talk (she glances at men to know whether they were worth glancing at her), and that all communication is a game of status. Not even the arrival of the Prime Minister is impressive: people have been talking about him like he is the god, and when he finally comes up to the stage, he is just ordinary and even comical. This weakens the pomp of the grandees and demonstrates how Woolf criticizes inherited privilege of classes.

B. Internal Ambivalence

Although Clarissa lives a successful life in high society, ambivalence and isolation are secretly present in her life. Woolf allows us to listen to the unspoken doubts of Clarissa although she is surrounded with servants and friends. Clarissa speaks to herself frequently out of the present to either memories or existential inquiries. Strolling in the Regent's Park she recollects her childhood at Bourton with Sally Seton - back then when she was sixteen and believed in life - and marvels at the current difference. She also wonders about age: she is nearly fifty years old, and she believes that the living things are heading in one direction, and the dead things are heading in the other (saying, for instance, that her living, social self was one thing, and the grave of her beloved sister was another). In words full of existential emotion, Clarissa thinks that her life is all this, not another world - a sign that she is aware of the smallness of her world.

Most importantly, Clarissa actually acknowledges the emptiness of sheer status. She criticizes privately the attitudes that she is defending publicly. To take one example, she plays the role of an amiable hostess but she concludes that love and religion are the most inhuman things in the world after she had heard Kilman trying to convert her into a fanatic at her party. Clarissa, as is pointed out by another critic, knows that both love and religion seek to dominate other people, an ugly realization that the former does not express out loud. This demonstrates the aspect of Clarissa and her delicate moral instinct: outwardly she is the ideal gracious lady but inside her heart is the personal judgment that goes against the rules of courtesy. Likewise, she envisions when Sally Seton explains to her that she was equally idealistic at her own youth, and Clarissa within herself laments that she did select security over passionate youth (Peter once told her that her marriage was self-destructive). Overall, Clarissa is more than happy to be privileged but she tends to question its definition. She is able to covet riches and also lament its barrenness. Similarly to what Mary

Madden notes about Woolf in general, the author is aware of how far she has gone in creating and continuing the structures of classes even as she is aware of their boundaries - and this conflict is what pans itself out in the mind of Clarissa.

C. Class Boundary Maintenance

Clarissa's consciousness of class is most evident in how she views those outside her circle. She instinctively distinguishes "us" versus "them." In public, she tries to be polite to servants or commoners (for instance, she greets a cleaning woman with a smile) but her interior voice betrays an unconscious distance. She is aware that she must act as if she sees "the poor" as part of the world, but she never truly lets them in. During a walk she notices working-class people in the street ("boys lugging double-barrelled guns in butcher shops") with a slight detachment. Her mind overflows with consciousness of class: she remarks that a woman "in a blue straw hat" is "cleverly educated," while an old beggar seems to her like "a monster" (a frightening encounter witnessed in the park). Clarissa cannot help but classify people by appearance and station.

Her treatment of Miss Kilman exemplifies this boundary maintenance. Kilman, Elizabeth's poor, pious governess, becomes Clarissa's nemesis at the party. Clarissa perceives Kilman with resentment and disgust. To the readers, Clarissa calls Kilman names and even has a momentary wish to see her punished. In the narrative, Clarissa's thoughts reveal that she feels Kilman's presence is a violation of her exclusive world ("this way of dominance," "[she] wants to fell her"). After their encounter, Clarissa reverts to dismissiveness: she calls Kilman's anger a "prehistoric monster" that "suddenly seems to shrink and crumble" under social rituals. In all these scenes, who Clarissa turns away from is telling – Kilman's lower-middle status and religious fervor mark her as outside Clarissa's caste. Clarissa cannot conceive of Kilman as an equal; she is only an unpleasant "something" to be tolerated. Thus Woolf shows that upper-class identity relies on the very distinctions it pretends not to see. Clarissa's tacit attitude is that certain people are not even real people to her: she may speak to an old lady neighbor, but in her mind that lady is practically invisible ("neighbours for years but never spoken" in Clarissa's thoughts). This elitism is so ingrained that Clarissa scarcely notices it – to her, maintaining distance is natural.

Clarissa personifies the upper-class consciousness of Mrs Dalloway: she performs status for everyone to see, yet privately feels constrained and sometimes critical of what she does. Her comfort in privilege coexists with subtle ambivalence about its worth. Through Clarissa, Woolf reveals the invisible

walls the upper class erects to separate themselves from “the others,” even as they put on a mask of inclusiveness.

IV. Peter Walsh and the Critique of Class Pretension

Peter Walsh is one of the former suitors of Clarissa and comes back to India early in the novel. Peter is as educated and genteel as Clarissa, but is not very wealthy as she. Peter represents a middle ground: being technically upper-middle class, he is not rich. This provides him with the insider and outsider position. In the absence of Clarissa, Peter criticizes social life often biting at her party. He perceives the snobbish aspect of society the one Clarissa disregards. Even though he is attracted by the world that he has grown in, he despises its shallowness. As an example, Peter does not like that Clarissa has married a normal life; he believes that the entire political society is affluent (he refers to Hugh Whitbread as an intolerable ass behind his back).

The weakness of the privilege of the classes is demonstrated in the ambivalence of Peter. On the one hand, he used to play among the rich children of Clarissa and can represent them. He satirizes insignificant parties and outlived aristocrats. One such prediction was that Clarissa would become a Prime Minister, and will be nothing but a useless appendage to politics (one of the remarks which Peter said that Clarissa made when she was knitting gloves). This hinges the fact that he is aware of the threat of Clarissa following the path taken by the upper classes blindly. He refers to her as the perfect hostess though with a touch of irony [6]. But Peter wants to have that world too; when he gets to the home of the Dalloways he desires approval of Clarissa and the old streets of London are comforting.

Most importantly, Peter constantly criticizes the pretensions of the London society. Even during a party, he scolds old money and nostalgia of the Empire. He observes the way Lady Bruton and others are holding onto class causes of the past. Peter, in his own mind, represents the voice of disillusionment: he thinks of other lifestyles, about his own disillusionments (how Miss Kilman too scandalized a school by being German), and about what he has lost. Although, his critiques, Peter does not completely get out of the system of classes. He continues to make himself by the world he denies. As an illustration, he is envious of Clarissa getting married and becoming wealthy (he examines the bracelet of Richard properly and asks himself why Richard does not take Clarissa off her feet like he would do).

It is this duality of denouncing the class world and at the same time still being bound to it, that points out the fact that the class norms take over the consciousness. Peter serves as a foil to Clarissa: he envies her world and idolizes her world. When he establishes Clarissa as a snob, it is partially due to jealousy. According to one of the scholars, Vicki Lee, (with regards to Woolf class), most characters cling desperately to the values system instilled in them by the class as they criticize it. The cruelty of his judgments is eye-opening: Peter shows the triviality that Clarissa disregards, but he is unable to completely overcome his own class position (to use the words of Madden). Therefore, the viewpoint of Peter as he opens up the barrenness of the highbrow surface as well as decries his loss of touch when he rejects it. His tone in *Mrs Dalloway*, therefore, highlights the fact that Woolf is trying to send a message that pretence by classes is both personal and never fulfilling, even those who oppose such systems like Peter remain in the same social system.

V. Septimus Warren Smith: Marginality, Trauma, and the Failure of the Social Order.

Septimus Warren Smith, in great contrast to Clarissa and Peter, is a social outsider. He is an old man of the Somme, but of working-class origin, sensitive in nature and completely helpless in the society that is polite. The story of Septimus is a commentary of the manner in which the class system (and its institutions) is unkind to its outcasts.

A. Septimus as the “Other” of the Social System.

Septimus is symbolic of the margins. He possesses nothing and has no status and positioning. Out on the streets of London they are an isolated couple when he and his wife Rezia are wandering. The alienation of Septimus is brought out clearly by the words used by Woolf: he perceives the world as being completely out of touch with him. According to one of his critics: in the society of the upper classes in pre-war London, Septimus cannot find his place. In fact, Septimus himself, writes that the society considers him as something abnormal and not worthy of sympathy. In contrast to the luxurious situation of Clarissa, Septimus lives an abject life, having a small apartment on rent (the room Rezia longs to see sunlight in), and working as a shopper.

Woolf literally compares Septimus and Clarissa with each other, expressing their existence in the same streets, yet they were on two different planets. To take a case in point, both Clarissa and Septimus encounter an elderly woman at Regent Park: Clarissa accepts her as another element in the landscape, whilst Septimus is obsessed with her in some sort of religious apparition. Clarissa is prim and controlled forever, Septimus is disturbed and anguished. The experience of war has made him talk to the clouds and birds, as

well (Men must not cut down trees... There is a God. He is speaking to me” a hallucination that terrorizes him. Every time we see Septimus by others (as when he maniacally responds to a reporter on the heath) how completely he fails to fit into society is underlined.

The origin of Septimus is also an important element in the class criticism: he served his country in the ranks, and then he comes back to discover that the system of classes does not sympathise with him at all, and the first doctor he meets, Dr. Holmes, is a bourgeois and feeble man, the second psychiatrist, Sir William Bradshaw, is a stern upper-class Victorian epitomiser. Neither the doctor is concerned with the suffering of Septimus. Rather, Bradshaw reads out categorized aphorisms (mans must have a sense of proportion, you know), because to be a soldier, and now a husband, Septimus must always be steady and happy. The sensitivity of Septimus, according to Bradshaw, is just the failure of discipline.

B. Psychiatry and social Control.

Psychiatric institution that is depicted in Mrs Dalloway is depicted as a tool of class power. Dr. Holmes is not unkind and is also patronizing; he resides in a cozy house and he considers Rezia to be overly emotional. Even more honest is Sir William Bradshaw: he is respectable, but his means are paternalistic. Bradshaw demands a cure of isolation, rest, and feels that he is a favor to Septimus. Bradshaw says that Septimus is mentally unsound when he refuses to adhere since it is not war that caused him to be that way but because he does not profess faith and discipline. To put it briefly, the failure of Septimus is perceived as a vice, but not a social issue.

Woolf utilizes these figures to point out how the authority of misinterpretation of human suffering is misread due to the influence of class. Even the professionals, who must listen to Septimus, instead, foist their ideals of the middle class to him. The doctors are nothing more than an oppressive element of society in the mind of Septimus. In one of the analyses it is noted that Woolf is employing Septimus to criticize a society which has gone pathological over sensitivity and romanticized stoicism. That is, the gentlemen doctors represent the ethos of British upper-class: they place the importance on self-control and perceive the emotional honesty of Septimus as a sign of weakness.

This is also reinforced by the life history of Septimus, who, as Madden reminds us, has always been poor, he has lacked all the privileges. He is even unable to treat himself to first-class treatment. In fact, Septimus and Rezia waiting in the cold when visiting Sir William are unable to break the hierarchy in the medical

setting. This literal and figurative state of being in the cold makes them poor, which makes them outsiders to the same closed social circle that Clarissa is in.

C. The Death of Septimus as Hypocritical Crash.

Septimus commits suicide and this is the tragic climax of his character, although in the story of Woolf, it represents a greater attack on the failures of society. Where Clarissa, at the end of her day, finds relief in the success of a successful party, Septimus, in the end of his day, finds relief in the great relief of being dead. His death is contrasted to that of Clarissa: she and the guests initially learn about dead people shell-shocked and then laugh at the news man. Meantime, Septimus is really killed-- and that is indifferent to the party. Woolf therefore makes an out and out comparison: one of the stories praises life based on the social rites, the other makes a claim on the death wrought by the social neglect.

The suicide of Septimus can be interpreted as the symbolic failure of the social order. He literally falls through a window and dies, implying that the high order in society has no room to accommodate him other than to shove him through a window. His demise represents the final loss of privilege of the classes. According to the critics, his tragedy is a product of his mental distress and inability to express his internal torment. The fact that Clarissa knows nothing about Septimus until the following day, and even on that occasion only feels a slight wave of sadness, underlines how the class system disregards him. Septimus in a way is an unwilling counter-narrative to the story of success that Clarissa is having: as Clarissa appears to have a life, the life of Septimus is overlooked and disregarded.

The story of Mrs Dalloway provides a contrast of these results to reveal social inequality. Through making the interior world of Septimus resemble that of Clarissa in the stream-of-consciousness style, Woolf asks readers to experience both sides of the coin at the same time. According to critic Iswarya and Sujatha, Septimus is alienated because, in the scales of the society, his pain is not felt by society since he went through war [20]. The consequence of this is that Septimus is unable to fit into a world that refuses to acknowledge his suffering and the doctors surrounding him misunderstanding his state (i.e. his status in the world misinterprets him). The fact that he cannot fit into his social role is what contributes to death. This final result exposes the ethical hypocrisy of a social system which does not recognize the human price of war, or challenge this own luxury.

VI. Miss Kilman and the Politics of Resentment

Elizabeth has a history tutor, Miss Doris Kiman, a minor but a very striking character. Woolf dramatizes the lower resentment of classes through Kilman. Kilman is educated (has a degree) but belongs to lower-middle classes and of German descent; she was fired by one of the schools because she was too German during the war. Today, at the middle age, she is destitute, ugly and spends her life in religion. Kilman represents a combination of female and class oppression: she is ambitious and intelligent but her social position puts an end to her promotion.

Kilman is living a material deprived life. We are introduced to the fact that she is wearing a ratty mackintosh because she is not able to afford better clothes. She is a tutor who offers her services to Elizabeth at a low salary, occupies a tiny room and survives on a meager diet of prayer and books. This financial insecurity is the source of her bitterness. Kilman sees almost everything we think of Clarissa regarding her wealth: she has everything, everything, Kilman thinks, and I have got only my cooking. She feels that fate has not been on her side: since Clarissa was born as a privileged person, Kilman is a victim of being deprived of happiness and luxury.

Kilman directs this hostility towards her. She is jealous of Clarissa and her position. Kilman, in one emotion-filled scene, glimpses Clarissa and is filled with a rush of power of serene and righteousness that the very fact that Clarissa is there at the party makes her feel like it is challenging her. She hopes that she could bring down Clarissa, as she would bring down one of the large trees her pastor speaks about. Then Kilman and Clarissa part, Clarissa is outraged at having been shown hate by Kilman and fails to understand how far Kilman goes in her envy. Clarissa cannot even imagine what Kilman suffers, as it were.

The bitterness expressed by Kilman is also ideological. The fact that she is a newly turned strict Christian makes her bitter about worldly pleasure and accomplishment. She is telling herself that she is not jealous of the kind of women like Clarissa are, but the fact is she feels inferior: she pities the life of Clarissa but actually hates it. Clarissa and the society of fine ladies should be humbled in her thoughts - Kilman tries to fantasize about taking them to work in factories so they can learn how to work hard. This bloody imagery (of good ladies who are deprived of luxury) demonstrates how deep the hostility of classes was in her. To Kilman, the only authority she holds is to wear and control Elizabeth and she fantasizes about having Elizabeth as her property and even contemplates marrying her in the event that Clarissa would die. The fact

that she is attached to Elizabeth is a symbol of her desire to climb the social ladder and have a sense of emotional stability that she is deprived of in her social status.

In all these scenes Woolf does not mention that Kilman is right in her hate towards Clarissa, though we can see her suffering. Through the lens used by Kilman, we can say that the British society has provided her with nothing that Clarissa Dalloway had in her life, except in suffering and hot-water bottle at night. In comparison, the world inhabited by Clarissa is all about chicken in aspic and flowered rooms. Kilman lives out of necessity and she does so without the comfort. So although Kilman is individualized in a sense of being a fanatic, Woolf is also a pity. Woolf at times defends herself by reasserting the boundaries of class that were otherwise repugnant to her, as one scholar observes in general of the class perspective of hers. This is one side of the boundary of the viewpoint of Kilman. She is the border to the world of Clarissa and critically looks inside and reveals its superficially. And in this regard Kilman is satirically used too: she is partly ridiculous in her bitterness (she recites Psalms at jokes, etc.), yet it is no less than a reference to actual conflict between classes. Through Kilman, Woolf is therefore dramatizing the ugliness created by inequality. This is not a simple villainy of Miss Kilman, but rather a victim of the class system who is bitter but in both personal and political senses of that word. Putting such disparate women (Kilman and Clarissa) in the same world of the family, Woolf transports the reader to an understanding of the sheer breadth of the gap between classes.

VII. Public Spaces and Urban Class Encounters

Even London itself is nearly a Mrs Dalloway character, the cityscape expresses the class division in rather subtle forms. The action of the novel is mainly held outside: Clarissa is walking in Westminster and in Regent park, Septimus in the streets; a backfiring automobile and a skywriting airplane intertwine the story. London, in which Woolf is located, is simultaneously both unified and segmented. The Bond Street, the Mall, and Belgravia (mentioned in the novel) are all signs of affluence. Clarissa is living along Bond Street; Hugh Whitbread spends money on fancy presents in the same street; Lady Bruton and her friends are negotiating exports to Canada in St James; the Prime Minister is chauffeured to rich areas. These destinations are indicators of privilege in the upper-class. Meanwhile, Woolf also gives slight peepings of the working people: Clarissa passes office clerks and butchers on her way; she sees a pink jacket of a housemaid in a window of a domestic. Significant incidents, such as the Bond Street car backfire (a bomb threat) temporarily unite people of all preferences (ambulance drivers, reporters, aristocrats) on the street.

But such instances of communal experience are short, vague. Critics have discussed the way in which the London by Woolf is turned into an ideology. According to Petar Penda, it is like London is a kind of political entity: the private and the general are merged. Clarissa is an inward looking person whose solitude of soul in the novel imagery finally comes into conflict with the first of the streets. According to one connotation, there exists no such thing as the private in Woolfian London, and the city and its citizens are thus one inseparable political entity. This implies that the issue of classes is reflected in the open areas just like in the parlor. As an example, when Big Ben hits, all London hears it without distinction people, status etc., and that brings the people of London together in that vast fertile silence (an image employed in the novel). Similarly, as Clarissa peeps down Bond Street towards her party, she observes people as small in the windows, nobles up, pedestrians down, a literal division of the hierarchy of classes.

In the novel, a few moments highlight cross-class encounters. Clarissa notices an old veteran bowing to an aristocrat – an awkward social choreography of deference. She also sees a working-class family pushing a pram, which reminds her of Elizabeth. Septimus, crossing a park, stares at an old flâneur in admiration, ignoring the gentleman beside him in uniform. These vignettes suggest that in the city proximity does not equal equality: everyone is physically close, yet the “invisible” boundaries persist. Indeed, as one scholar notes, London’s spaces only acquire meaning through social use: the parks, streets and fields “do not exist before they are used by people”. In Mrs Dalloway, a park path is only a park path because Clarissa and Septimus traverse it; otherwise it might as well be empty air.

However, Woolf relies on certain experiences that they share to allude to potential similarity. According to Julia Briggs (cited in Penda), even characters in Mrs Dalloway are moved by such trivial things as car backfire on Bond Street or skywriting in the park. These incidences momentarily blur the boundaries of classes: a minute the staccato beat of Big Ben, the glitter of an airplane path, or even the mere sight of an elderly woman singing in the park are imprinted in the minds of both Clarissa and Septimus. It opines that under hardened roles, there is a mutual way of human response. On the same note, Peter Walsh envisions the city as carnival of intertwined boats, which means that even high and low classes sail on the same social stream. Class is another domain that the spatial segregation addresses: servants are behind refined doors, and miners or soldiers are introduced to us in limited views only. At the end of the party, Clarissa watches silently as the servants are closing and reflects on how they will have no idea what the story of Septimus is. The geography of London, with its shaded streets of Westminster and its tight

boarding-houses of Bloomsbury, adds to the barrier even in cases when the characters pass the boundary.

Overall, Woolf portrays London as a city of layers: they all breathe the same air, but their impressions of the city are so different.

VIII. The Party as a Microcosm of the English Social Hierarchy

The highlight of the novel, and a microcosm of the English society, is Clarissa and her evening party. On the one hand, the party is nothing but a social ritual a flow of com-and-go visitors, small talk, and background music. However, Woolf has skillfully scuffled the guests in terms of minor rank and reputation according to the ranking. Noble guests (Lady Bruton), politicians (Lady Rosseter, a war widow and a Conservative MP), literary friends (Clarissa is smitten with her dear friend Sally Seton) and career men (Peter Walsh, an editor) mix in the same drawing-room. The aged and helpless Lady Rosseter is reclining at one extreme; the ambitious Hugh Whitbread is peering at his watch at the other. The discussion switches between prosaic and personal: Hugh questions Peter about his intentions not to go to Oxford, Lady Bruton attempts to have a letter to the Times, and Clarissa is worried that her guests are having fun. This set up highlights the divisions of classes. Even the manner in which guests address one another is an indication of rank. Lady Bruton, the aristocrat, talks in high tones about emigration; Richard (the middle classes, husband of Clarissa) talks in a polite way, and does not really fit in with the titled. The fact that Peter comments on Hugh as an ass that is getting on my nerves reflects the fact that the lower statuses (however, still rich) rub against the hair of those higher. There are mutterings of army rank and titles of parliament. The Prime Minister is talked of reverently and fearfully. Simply put, the guests of the party are a social spectrum - however, it is close to the home of Clarissa who is on the upper part of the spectrum.

Amid this structured event, Clarissa has a brief but profound realization. When Lady Bradshaw announces the suicide of “a young man” (Septimus), the news momentarily travels across the party. Clarissa notices something – the reaction on people’s faces, the sound of the final report. She finds herself feeling compassion in an unaccustomed way. In the next morning’s pages, Clarissa thinks that the death of Septimus, a stranger, makes her feel “foolish and extravagant” about her own party, and for a moment she connects the two lives emotionally. The narrative describes her thus: after hearing the news, Clarissa feels as if she “must assemble” herself – not to hide any part of herself, but “a peaceful gathering of her identity into one”. In other words, the party forces Clarissa to integrate all of her selves (party hostess, former young

rebel with Sally, wife, human being) into one consciousness. This assembly of identity includes a flash of empathy for Septimus's suffering – a crack in her class worldview.

But this temporary collapse of structure is short lived. When the Prime Minister is remarked on by the guests as looking ordinary, the party soon gets back to circulating normally. Peter and Sally talk in a secret, Clarissa father is sleeping in another room and Clarissa herself returns to entertainments. At the end, the party does restore social order. Clarissa scoffs her previous sympathy as stupidity and instructs the employees to continue on with things. But Woolf does not answer the question: have these aristocrats, born so high, caught a glimpse of an ordinary humanity, or will they keep up their pleasant game? Class tensions are revealed even in a place of social ritual, the party. Indicatively, the scene, when Miss Kilman enters with Elizabeth, when she is standing close to Clarissa, scowling, can be viewed as a subversion of the hierarchy. Clarissa feels that Kilman is an evil mark. Following the departure, Clarissa even believes that the relationship between her party and the zeal of Kilman has depicted to her, something inhuman of society. Hugh Whitbread, another visitor, is envious in his resentment against Richard when Richard purchases Clarissa a bouquet (he thinks of doing this, but fails). These scenes bring out the intersection of status and emotions.

In general, the party held by Clarissa is a miniature of the English social hierarchy: it unites the classes and presents them in the execution of their roles. It is all arranged in such a way that every human being stays in his/her position, at least, whereas any form of challenge to this status (news of Septimus death, Sally being there as a reminder of defiance) is pushed away at all cost. In these minuscule crevices only does Woolf hint at the fact of any connection across the lines of classes.

IX. Conclusion

The invisibility of class which supports identity and society is exposed in *Mrs Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf. Her modernist narrative style, which is to interweave her interior monologues, enables her to show how different characters, as diverse as Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, bring their class awareness into all their thoughts and actions. The ideal upper-class hostess, Clarissa, demonstrates us the advantages, as well as restrictions of the privilege: she is born, bred and praised, but secretly she is empty and unnoticed under the burden of her position. Peter Walsh and Miss Kilman are some of the characters who hold some ambiguous or resentful stand in terms of class. Peter, a born gentleman, has been estranged by the world of Clarissa and he condemns its superficiality, a fact that reminds us that one cannot be above

questions of class. Kilman, however, is mocked as having no room in the high world, and her resentment of

Clarissa is an antagonism of class below.

The trauma of Septimus is a strong contrast. He is the displaced other whose even death makes the privileged characters face (albeit temporarily) the life of a being that is totally ignored by them. Septimus Woolf plays the breakdown of the social order: a man has lost his life in a war, and the society is represented by the social aristocracy that sees no necessity to express anything. The last lesson of the novel is hence two-sided: the society (which is represented by the party of Clarissa) may seem united and civilized but is actually very weak and selfish. Woolf demonstrates that although her characters talk about solidarity and human relationship their inner space is still segregated by the classes. The novel by Woolf is therefore relevant today. Its depiction of privilege and psychological distress appeals to the burning problem: what limits the individual to the social structure? What about the other people in the sufferings whose causes are so different? The moment of singular compassion of Septimus by Clarissa is the indication that there can be awareness across boundaries, Woolf does not answer the question whether this can be maintained. Finally, the book, *Mrs Dalloway*, tries to show that even when the differences in classes are not directly recognized, they do exist but invisibly, and just as any law they define the value of the personality and character and influence relationships. Woolf encourages the readers to recognize the existing classism in their own society by allowing the high and the low to speak. According to one of the modern scholars, Woolf denounces the ancient system of Empire, repression, and classism, and the fact that to survive in the contemporary world is to look beyond it. *Mrs Dalloway* is timeless as a critique of the privileges of classes, and a plea to empathy, a scream of connection, a cry of connection, across the division, however slight, in a world that is still plagued with rank.

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