

“A KIND OF ECSTASY”:
QUEER MOMENTS
AND THE POWER OF THE CLOSET
IN *MRS. DALLOWAY*

By

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AND THE POWER OF THE CLOSET
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Abstract:

Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* contrasts two very dissimilar characters: the eponymous Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, a wealthy older woman who is preparing for a party, and Septimus Smith, a young soldier who is contemplating suicide. Throughout the novel, these two characters both struggle with their recollections of past queer moments which disturb their present (straight) lives, while they attempt to find identification with other people. Woolf frames both characters within the novel as parallels, despite their different social classes and backgrounds. Both characters exist in a perpetually closeted space which requires them to conform to heteronormativity, or the assumption and need for straightness. Septimus's and Clarissa's attempts at connection are marked by past queer moments which juxtapose their past selves with their present selves, disrupting the flow of time and breaking through the walls of the closet, if only momentarily. These queer moments disrupt heterosexual performativity within the text and dramatically alter the lives of both Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, bridging the gap between their differing social classes to create a single moment of queer understanding through action.

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CHAPTER I

A KIND OF ECSTASY: QUEER MOMENTS AND THE POWER OF THE CLOSET IN *MRS. DALLOWAY*

Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs. Dalloway* contrasts two dissimilar characters as parallels: the eponymous Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, a wealthy older woman who is preparing for a party, and Septimus Smith, a young soldier who is contemplating suicide. These two characters both struggle with heteronormativity and their place in it. While attempting to find comradery with other people, both fall short, unable to fulfill the roles which heteronormativity has foisted upon them. Woolf mirrors both Septimus's and Clarissa's attempts at connection and action within a chaotic and changing world. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narration is episodic, located within a closely focalized third person which chronicles the heteronormative lives of Septimus and Clarissa. This episodic narration serves to document queer moments, or past moments which have the potential to disorder the present; these moments continue to haunt Septimus and Clarissa. Like ghosts, queer moments trouble their lives and disturb the closet's sway, and thus such communicative moments alter and disrupt the present (straight) temporality of the characters. Due to the seclusion of the closet, it is painful for both characters to live in a heteronormative world. These moments of homosocial recognition serve both to reorient the heterosexual performativity necessitated by the closet away from a straight destiny

and to dramatically alter the lives of both Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, serving to breach their closeted existence through action.

Introduction

Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf examines the heterosexual framework with which the characters must contend.¹ Woolf's writing style creates a series of interlocking moments, some of which allow for the juxtaposition of two different perspectives, as in the case of Clarissa recalling her feelings for Sally, while denying that she still experiences those feelings. Sara Ahmed defines queer moments as being made of "the intellectual experience of disorder" (Ahmed 4), and due to Woolf's associative style, these queer moments take on another meaning, that of time. This disorder casts apart both Clarissa and Septimus in time so that their two narratives are adrift, separated from linear time. Their personal histories, once anchored in straightness, deviate from a normative pattern.

Other critics have interpreted the characters of Clarissa and Septimus as homosexual, though not necessarily within the concept of the queer moment as a means of defying the totality of the closet. Alex Zwerdling broaches the topic of Clarissa's "revulsion from heterosexuality" (170). James Schiff comments, "Clarissa Dalloway, whose sexual orientation would appear to be largely toward women, ends up in a rather chaste, heterosexual marriage that crushes her soul," but he does not explore the reasons which compel Clarissa to stay within her heterosexual relationship (368). Dirk Schultz

¹ Both Septimus and Clarissa interact with other people in homosocial relationships, but both characters remain in heterosexual relationships, due to the compulsory heterosexuality of post-World War I England and resultant closeting. As of 1885, section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act prohibited "gross indecency between males," thus it was illegal to engage in homosexual sex (Cook 133).

sees the critical portrayal of heterosexual marriages within *Mrs. Dalloway* to be a sign that the whole novel is “skeptical of ‘true’ communication and stable identities” (125). Through the action encapsulated by the queer moment, Woolf decenters and calls into question the stability of the heterosexual marriage through juxtaposition with the homosexual reality. Meanwhile, for Tonya Krouse, Septimus Smith is trapped within a discourse of sexual pathologization as Woolf “evaluates characters in terms of sexuality and diagnostically situates characters along a continuum of sexual experiences and pleasures” (15). Krouse identifies Septimus’s place within the pathologized view of homosexuality which the medical discourse of the 1910s presented. However, Krouse focuses on the way Woolf’s narrative “diagnoses the homosexuality of the individual,” while I center my understanding of Woolf’s narrative within the traumatic experience of the closet. Heteronormativity, the assumption and need for straightness, is the mechanism by which the closet forces silence upon queer characters throughout Woolf’s narrative (16). Gay Wachman interprets *Mrs. Dalloway* “as a survey of suppressed lesbianism (or homosexuality in the case of Septimus) whose motive force was Woolf’s growing interest in Vita Sackville-West” (349). As an alternative to her biographical approach, I situate the force which suppresses homosexuality as the closet, operating through the silence and fear imposed by heteronormative; the queer moment extends outside of and beyond this closeting, to create harmony between queer characters who have never met across time.

Finally, the temporal nature of Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness narration is constructed of many moments. Kate Haffey argues that these queer moments are queer because of the way they constitute a specific temporal disorder: “These moments that Clarissa describes are ones in which Clarissa is able to break through the temporal

divides between past and present in order to experience pleasure and desire across them” (Haffey 141-142). These queer moments disrupt traditional heterosexist narratives. The idea of a “breaking through” allows Clarissa to, in a sense, time-travel: she is able to revisit her old memories over the course of this novel. For Haffey, this breaking-through is the means through which the queer moment operates, but for the purposes of this essay, this queer moment finds its most potent form within and as a resistance to the tyranny of the closet, a bursting of closet doors, a resistance even within the closet. In this way, I argue such a queer moment can be more than potentiality; it can take form through physical action. In this paper, I will first delineate how the queer moment exists within the closet, how the queer moment traverses outside the closet in the moment of action to create potentiality for recovery in the case of Clarissa, and how the closet limits such action in the case of Septimus through the added stress posed by heteronormative masculinity. Finally, I will discuss the means by which the queer moment bridges the social gap between Clarissa and Septimus to create a moment of queer understanding through action.

Stream of Consciousness and the Queer Moment

This stream of consciousness narration intentionally plays with ideas of conflicting and diverging time, lending itself to the queering of the temporal as moments of action intersperse and break up the tedium of normative, “straight” time. Jose Esteban Munoz discusses the queer possibilities of such temporal unmooring through the image of knowing ecstasy: “Ekstasis, in the ancient Greek...means “to stand” or “to be out outside of oneself...This temporally calibrated idea of ecstasy contains the potential to help us encounter a queer temporality, a thing that is not the linearity that many of us have been

calling straight time.” (Munoz 186). Woolf’s “ecstasy” is her stream-of-consciousness narrative which brings the thoughts of her characters into conversation and juxtaposition with each other. In this way, her characters are able to exist outside of linear time. Clarissa remains attached to Sally, as she is still able to evoke her old feelings.² Septimus’s fear of any failure of masculinity leads him to strive for apathy at Evans’ death; while he is unable to reconcile his feelings, he is still haunted by Evans’ ghost. He is living the past, haunted by the war. While Clarissa’s existence within multiple temporal realities gives her a certain pleasure, Septimus finds no such release.

While the physical timeline of *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place within one day, much of the narrative of the novel is located within the minds of Septimus and Clarissa, informed by their various experiences and prejudices. The different perspectives of Septimus, Clarissa, and the other characters serve to disorient the reader. Sara Ahmed centers the queer moment in moments of disorientation: “After all, phenomenology is full of queer moments; as moments of disorientation that Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests involve not only ‘the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us’” (Ahmed 4). Throughout the novel, Woolf depicts moments which extend beyond the closet as phantasmic events of giddy pleasure or overwhelming dismay. These moments manifest as a wave of joy in the case of Clarissa: “a wave which

² Judith Halberstam’s *In A Queer Time and Place* names the queer temporality which the kiss offers up through a reading of Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*. Halberstam reads *The Hours* as a retelling of *Mrs. Dalloway* which offers a different futurity: “Cunningham turns Clarissa away from the seemingly inexorable march of narrative time toward marriage...and uses not consummation but the kiss as the gateway to alternative outcomes” (3).

she let flow over her” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 11). Clarissa sees the morning as full of joy and promise, despite her distaste for the heteronormative. But in the case of Septimus, these moments are not exhilaration, but horror: “this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him.” (13). For Septimus, the world is not full of light and life, but only veiled threats and dangerous expectations of the future.

The Closet

Heteronormativity is a societal worldview which promotes straightness as the essential default, along with the assumption that men have desire for women and women have desire for men, and that it is natural and normal for men and women to marry. Heteronormativity also presupposes that men and women engage in a certain kind of dynamic, in which the woman takes the submissive role in all things. Compulsory heterosexuality, then, is not only the belief that it is natural to be heterosexual, but that there is no other alternative; it does not offer the possibility of any other life. Thus, compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity create the *closet*: the need for sexual minorities to strive for an appearance of heterosexuality. Eve Sedgwick discusses the phenomenon of the closet in relation to her earlier work *Between Men*, and how it affected her reading of literary texts in her previous work:

One characteristic of the readings in [*Between Men*] is to attend to performative aspects in texts... An assumption underlying [*Between Men*] is that the relations of the closet- the relations of the known and unknown, the explicit and the explicit around homo / heterosexual definition - have the potential for being particularly revealing, in fact, about speech acts generally...But in the vicinity of the closet

even what *counts* as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis
(*Epistemology of the Closet* 3).

Mrs. Dalloway is constructed of speech acts. The inner narrative of the characters (along with their opinions and reactions to the events of one day) reflect compulsory heterosexuality and the presence of the closet. When Clarissa thinks back to her youth, to her holiday spent in a vacation house in Bourton, her thoughts of her friend Sally are passionate: “But the charm was overpowering, to her at least, so that she could remember standing in her bedroom at the top of the house holding the hot-water can in her hands and saying aloud, ‘She is beneath this roof . . . She is beneath this roof!’” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 29). While Clarissa insists she no longer feels passion for Sally, she still remembers the depth of feelings she had for her old friend, as her memories of Sally pervade her days, as does her dissatisfaction with married life. She cannot reconcile her own personhood with the fact that her name is now Mrs. Richard Dalloway, not Clarissa. Her obligation to marry has even affected her name (9). Meanwhile, Septimus denies any passion or sadness when his fellow officer Evans is killed in World War I (73), but he is haunted by Evans’ specter everywhere (21). He must also deal with the trauma which the war has wrought upon his mental health, to the point of threatening suicide. Septimus’s interactions in homosocial relations are especially topical in this light: his experiences with Evans create a sharp contrast to the enmity he feels for Dr. Holmes, his physician. Both Septimus and Clarissa deal with compulsory heterosexuality and are affected by it in different ways, as the power of the closet shapes both Septimus’s and Clarissa’s day- and the entirety of their lives.

From the opening of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the temporal is prevalent. Woolf's work opens with Clarissa on her way to purchase flowers for her party, in the early morning. In the morning air, she feels as though she is eighteen again, out in the summer after a night of dancing. "Oh if she could have had her life over again!" she reflects, "This body she wore... with all its capacities, seemed nothing— nothing at all. She had 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." (*Mrs. Dalloway* 9). While Clarissa loves the vibrancy of the city, she feels the presence of her husband's name obscuring her own. She is no longer a girl, but she has expectations, requirements. Despite the independence which she has in her marriage to Richard, she can no longer be Clarissa but instead, she must be Mrs. Richard Dalloway. As a married woman, she is now identified by her husband's name. Her body itself is seen (if seen at all) as an extension of her husband, and she, Clarissa, has been erased. Exasperated with her role as a society wife, Clarissa rebels. As a society woman, she has a duty to visit the wife of her friend, though she knows that her visit will only be for show: "Clarissa...turned and walked back towards Bond Street, annoyed, because it was silly to have other reasons for doing things." (8-9). Instead, she turns and walks the opposite direction, determined not to fulfill what is expected of her.

Such a nullification is another force of the closet which serves to erase Clarissa's queer identity, along with her identity as it existed before marriage. In "Happy Futures, Perhaps" Sarah Ahmed makes the argument that in order for Mrs. Dalloway to exist as Mrs. Dalloway, she must nullify her inner self: "Becoming Mrs. Dalloway is itself a form

of disappearance: to follow the paths of life (marriage, reproduction) is to feel that what is before you is a kind of solemn progress, as if you are living somebody else's life... For Mrs. Dalloway to reach these points is to disappear" (164). Her liberty as Clarissa is utterly foreign, set apart from her experiences as Mrs. Dalloway, but she is uneasy with her identification with her husband; taking his name is not the independence she craves. Her memories of her old self, as Clarissa, motivate Mrs. Dalloway to change her present movements, and in this way, her past interacts with her present. Despite her own personal struggles with her role in a heteronormative environment, she attempts to defy this expectation through this small rebellion, or disorder, as she physically changes her path, rerouting her solemn progress, if only for a time.

Woolf captures her characters' innermost thoughts and reactions to events as one continuous flow of narration; she intended this flow to link the characters together and to be psychologically telling. In her diary, she writes, "I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humor, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment" (*Diary of Virginia Woolf* 263). These nested thoughts join and contrast both Septimus and Clarissa, displaying the dramatic tension and stress which plagues both characters. Such narration filters through the minds of the characters within *Mrs. Dalloway*, connecting them together through shared moments, but these moments are easily sundered. Clarissa's trip to the flower shop is one of these scenes:

There were flowers: delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilac; and carnations, masses of carnations. ... And as she began to go with Miss Pym from jar to jar, choosing, nonsense, nonsense, she said to herself, more and more gently, as if this

beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her... and it lifted her up and up when—oh! a pistol shot in the street outside! ‘Dear, those motor cars,’ said Miss Pym. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 11-12)

This moment is one of transport: the flower shop, with its “delicious scent... exquisite coolness” (11) is a refuge from the street, a place outside of the flow and bustle of daily life, where Mrs. Pym and Mrs. Dalloway muse over the flowers, a moment which the motorcar rends with its backfiring engine. This moment of connection is marred by discord, which Mrs. Pym, and later, Septimus’s wife, correctly identify as the backfiring of a motorcar. This discord links Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus together: both identify the backfiring of the car as a threat. This disruptive moment serves another purpose, in allowing the narrative to flow to Septimus Smith.

Clarissa and Sally

Though Clarissa is currently married, her thoughts still turn to her past, and to her past actions which reached beyond the closet. As Clarissa shops for flowers, her thoughts turn to her girlhood friend Sally Seton, who made an impression on her during their summer at Bourton: “Her feeling for Sally... had a quality which could only exist between women, between women just grown up...But the charm was overpowering, to her at least, so that she could remember standing in her bedroom at the top of the house holding the hot-water can in her hands and saying aloud, ‘She is beneath this roof... She is beneath this roof!’ No, the words meant absolutely nothing to her now.”(*Mrs. Dalloway* 29). Clarissa entertains an agreeable frisson at the idea of Sally: the thought of her is captivating. She recalls the “charm” Sally brings with her as a moment of

overwhelming excitement and happiness, though she says she cannot force herself to revisit that feeling at the thought of Sally attending her party. The juxtaposition of her past feelings for Sally and her present feelings for Sally are at war with each other. While she might be happier if she had never encountered the possibility of other diverging ways of life, Clarissa constantly recalls her memories of Sally within the text. Her subsequent reaction to her thoughts of her girlhood friend and her protest that the old feelings “meant absolutely nothing to her now” seem like exaggeration. If these feelings truly meant nothing to her, would she remember them in such erotic detail? The erotic aura which surrounds her memories of Sally is, in fact, missing from her mundane heterosexual existence with her husband, as she acknowledges when she returns from her shopping expedition: “She could see what she lacked... It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman” (45). Joseph Allen Boone argues that Clarissa’s life with Richard motivates her to construct “an identity that is necessarily provisional, always shifting to accommodate both the pressures of the external world and the demands of inner need” (185). Clarissa’s heterosexuality is constructed of her need to exist within the closet, and she upbraids herself for her lack of sexual reciprocation towards her husband. Thus, Clarissa’s feelings for Sally are a chaotic element-- they challenge Clarissa’s current marriage to Richard Dalloway. Her life has been altered by her previous feelings for Sally.

Throughout Clarissa’s memories of Sally, one common thread holds sway: the fear of marriage, recalling Clarissa’s distaste towards her title of Mrs. Dalloway. “It was protective, on her side; sprang from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe)”

(*Mrs. Dalloway* 29). Both Sally and Clarissa dread the heteronormative expectation, the duty of marriage. They cannot be independent wild girls forever, but they must bend to the societal and economic necessity to marry and to be housewives.³ Marriage becomes a force of oppression throughout the lives of both Clarissa and Septimus, a means to push both Septimus and Clarissa further into the closet. This dread of marriage is juxtaposed with Clarissa's present life; she is the wife of a politician, and though she insists that she and Richard have "a little licence, a little independence" from each other, she is still identified by the title of Mrs. Richard Dalloway, her present self, and so she is disconnected from her previous self, the Clarissa who loved Sally (*Mrs. Dalloway* 6). Given the force of marriage as a means of further closeting, Clarissa's discomfort with her title is all the more momentous.

While Clarissa's marriage to Richard is passionless, her kiss with Sally is described as a moment of pure communion: "Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life... Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips...And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which...she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 30). Sally's kiss is no blasé affair. Years later, this moment still burns like the stars for Clarissa, a moment wrapped up which she will carry to her deathbed, a queer and disordered moment in time. Sally's kiss is the most vivid of Clarissa's memories, and the reason she

³ In *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*, Eileen Barrett comments that Woolf draws upon the relationship between Clarissa and Sally constitutes a recurring commentary on marriage: "this romantic friendship... contains a criticism on marriage that Woolf explores throughout the novel" (152).

finds dissatisfaction in her marriage to Richard. This moment is one of queer ecstasy, a treasured moment which encompasses Clarissa's past and present, an action of pure potential. Even as the kiss occurs, Clarissa knows she will have to stay within the closet: she must marry in order to preserve her economic standing. As a young girl on the cusp of womanhood, she already realizes this fact. Perhaps the interruption from Peter is all the more upsetting in this light: "'Star-gazing?' said Peter. It was like running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 30). If Sally's kiss is ecstatic, Peter's comment brings Clarissa back to the reality of heteronormativity. She can only star-gaze, she cannot fully act upon her feelings for Sally. If this queer moment is a stream, Peter's intrusion into it is a dam, stopping the moment in midflow. She cannot continue to love Sally and survive in a world which assumes her heterosexuality, and so Clarissa must become Mrs. Richard Dalloway, despite her discomfort with married life.

In remembering her old self, Clarissa's present self cannot continue down a linear path. For Clarissa, these memories have one root: Sally. Clarissa's memories of Sally do not only allow her to remember her past feelings, but her memories also cause a resurgence of feelings, despite Clarissa's protests otherwise. Patricia Smith defines the act of lesbian panic thus: "the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character—or, conceivably, an author—is unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire" (2). Clarissa's repeated avoidance of her old self, the self that loved Sally, is a rejection of her lesbian self- and yet the lesbian self exists, disrupting her heterosexual present. As Clarissa dresses for her party, she recalls her old sensations: "She could remember going cold with excitement and doing her hair in a kind

of ecstasy (now the old feeling began to come back to her, as she took out her hairpins, laid them on the dressing-table, began to do her hair)” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 29). Her physical actions provoke the memories of the past. In this case, she remembers the sensation of doing her hair in a rush so that she could run down and meet Sally. She does not think of her husband when she dresses: the motions do not remind her of her heteronormative obligation to him, but of the passion she once had for Sally. Her actions are able to recall those old feelings, in an “ecstasy,” or stepping outside of herself. Patricia Smith depicts this moment as a “vivid meditation of female homoerotic pleasure, culminating in an orgasmic exclamation of *jouissance*, before returning to the reality of her sterile room” (45). Her memories of Sally transport her into erotic pleasure, a near out-of-body experience. Reminiscent of Munoz’s definition of queer temporality, Clarissa’s memories of Sally evoke a moment which challenges her current linear temporality. She may have been moving through life in a linear fashion, but now, her recollection breaks this linearity. In this way, the past recalls and forces Clarissa’s present self to confront the fact that she has been utterly changed, just by tasting the possibility of another life, one which does not fall within the lines of straightness, but outside, a queer life.

Septimus’s Masculinity

The car’s backfiring provokes two simultaneous actions, as Clarissa recalls her previous actions, and across the street, Septimus Smith is crossing the street. The backfiring of the car stops him in his tracks, and in time. Septimus suffers the aftereffects of fighting in World War I, and in this instance, he is reminded of a gunshot: “The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought.” (13). Septimus no longer feels as though he belongs in the world any

longer, and his fear of the pistol-like sound of the motor car only reinforces this belief. The narrative shifts to Septimus in what seems to be a deliberate move. Clarissa's experience of the morning is full of promise: she feels as though she is eighteen again, while Septimus feels as though he should die at any moment. Despite the fact that Clarissa is in her fifties, and Septimus is in his twenties, their ages seem inverted.

Notably, Septimus's wife cannot break him out of his apathetic reverie when she takes his arm to cross the street: "She had a right to his arm, though it was without feeling. He would give her, who was so simple, so impulsive, only twenty-four, without friends in England, who had left Italy for his sake, a piece of bone." (14). Rezia's macabre idea of Septimus's arm as a "piece of bone" repeats the earlier warlike imagery. His wife is not a refuge from the world, but a part of it. His feelings for her are those of duty, not passion. Thus, Woolf's associative style furthers character narration, linking both Septimus and Clarissa in their search for human connection and their distaste for the compulsory heterosexuality placed upon them.

Clarissa is capable of communicative action, no matter how fleeting, but for Septimus, these attempts are botched, aborted before they begin. Even his eyes show his fear (12). This trepidation is indicative of a deeper issue, as Septimus's part in the war has left him psychologically fragile. Rezia looks down upon this fragility. Despite the fact that Septimus is a veteran, she struggles to see him as she once did: "And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one. 'Septimus has been working too hard'—that was all she could say to her own mother... And it was cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now." (20) Like Clarissa, Septimus is disconnected from his name: he is not the brave Septimus

whom Rezia married, but another person entirely, a man who does not pay attention to her and threatens to kill himself. She cannot be proud of her virile English husband when he sees danger everywhere instead of protecting her, threatens to kill himself, and needs her help to cross the street without fearing the sound of bullets. She juxtaposes his previous virile self with the diminished version whom she must guide across the street. Septimus fails to perform masculinity adequately, and thus his relationship with his wife suffers.

Septimus's failure to perform masculinity is linked to his failure to maintain a healthy or straight homosociality with other men. Eve Sedgwick's definition of homosociality is particularly germane here, as she argues, "Homosocial is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex...To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (*Between Men* 1). Straight homosociality, then, demands performed masculinity, according to Sedgwick's definition. This homosociality is an important part of how men relate to and interact with each other. These interactions can manifest as amicable homosociality in close male friendships, or as violent homophobia, the mechanism by which heterosexual marriages and obligatory heterosexuality are maintained (3). In Septimus's youth, he was effeminate, until he went to war, where he "developed manliness" in a homosocial environment (*Mrs. Dalloway* 73). But Woolf does not stop at telling us that Septimus attained manliness, but continues: "[Septimus] developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name... Evans (Rezia,

who had only seen him once, called him ‘a quiet man’, a sturdy red-haired man, undemonstrative in the company of women)” (73). Septimus does not only find a homosocial relationship with his fellow officer, but affection as well. Woolf leaves the nature of this relationship open to interpretation, but it is worth noting that she feels it necessary to state that Evans was “undemonstrative” around women, indicating a lack of attraction.

Evans represents the masculinized image of the soldier, but Woolf implies his affection for Septimus may have been homosexual, crossing from the homosocial into the realm of the erotic. Woolf describes Septimus and Evans as having a kind of playful affection for each other: “It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug; one worrying a paper screw, snarling, snapping, giving a pinch, now and then, at the old dog’s ear...They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 73). David Dowling points out how this pleasant image reverses after Septimus returns home from war and must deal with the trauma which the war has given him; as a result, this image of the dead Evans “is monstrously inverted” (93). Septimus denies any feelings for Evans shortly before he notices the figure of Evans staring at him from behind the railings: “There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 21). This moment may be a queer moment, though not one of a joyous flow, but of a grating discord. To Septimus, the specter of Evans is just as real as his hand in front of him. He fears to lift his head and look. He cannot even turn away but sits with his legs crossed, immobilized despite the fact that Evans is beyond the railings, which we might read as the barrier between life and death which Septimus

cannot yet cross. Evans's specter defies time in this moment: Septimus utterly believes that Evans is there beyond the railings, looking at him, as he did before his death. While Evans is dead, he still haunts Septimus, a homosexual specter that reminds him of his shortcomings: his failure to save Evans, and his feelings for Evans which may have passed beyond the homosocial. In this way, Septimus has broken the rules of the homosocial: while one may enter into close male relationships, any erotic charge must exist between a man and a woman, not between two men. Septimus insists that his feelings for Evans were barely realized, even as friends. In fact, he takes pride in his reaction to Evans' death: "Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little" (73). While Septimus and Evans' relationship may have crossed from the homosocial to the homosexual, Septimus's reaction is an attempt to deny any possibility of homosexual feelings. Instead, he takes refuge in masculinity, repressing any feelings so that his reaction is an appropriately manly one. He denies his past outright. He attempts to act, but cannot move, paralyzed by his need to conform to normative masculinity.

In a reflection of this need for masculine conformity, Septimus battles with Dr. Holmes, his psychiatrist, throughout the narrative. Though Septimus attempts to hide his feelings regarding Evans, he cannot act in a way that expresses proper masculinity. Dr. Holmes compares Septimus with his own conduct and finds Septimus lacking: "Dr. Holmes examined him. There was nothing whatever the matter, said Dr. Holmes...When he felt like that he went to the Music Hall, said Dr. Holmes. He took a day off with his wife and played golf. Why not try two tabloids of bromide dissolved in a glass of water at

bedtime?" (77). Dr. Holmes does not take Septimus's mental trauma seriously: he only prescribes exercise, time with his wife (which implicitly includes having sex with her) and bromide, which, at that time, was used as a sedative. Septimus's suicidal urges are brushed aside by Dr. Holmes as a failure of manhood, easily solved by some masculine exercise and sex. According to Sedgwick, there is a third component to homosociality: "obligatory heterosexuality' is built into male-dominated kinship systems, or...homophobia is a *necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage." (*Between Men* 3). At every chance possible, Dr. Holmes highlights the fact that his masculinity does not fail him: he suggests "the music hall," and "play[ing] cricket,"boasting that he never falls "half a pound below eleven stone six", and is described as "large, fresh coloured, handsome" the perfect image of English masculinity, unlike the frail Septimus with his fearful eyes (*Mrs. Dalloway* 77). To Dr. Holmes, it is inconsequential whether Septimus's feelings for Evans ever crossed from the homosocial to the homosexual. Septimus suffers as a result of Evan's traumatic death, and such vulnerability does not properly reinforce Dr. Holmes' idea of masculinity. In this way, Dr. Holmes and Septimus's relationship reflects the toxicity of patriarchal homosociality, especially in the way in which Dr. Holmes uses Septimus's shortcomings to enforce masculinity over Septimus. Septimus is imprisoned within this cage of expectations which also prescribe how he must act, and thus he cannot breach the prison which the closet creates.

Homosociality and Homosexuality

Despite Clarissa's similarly closeted state, she is able to act, while Septimus is restricted. Clarissa remembers the "purity" of the feelings she used to hold for Sally: she

does not see the feelings as unnatural, as Septimus seems to view his feelings for Evans, but instead, she sees her feelings for Sally as the natural feelings between two young women on the brink of adulthood. Just as Clarissa begins to note her feelings for Sally as she comes of age, Septimus joins the army as a young man, and in the trenches “he developed manliness... drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name.” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 73). Thus, both Clarissa and Septimus engage in homosocial relationships as they reach adulthood, and these homosocial relationships seem to veer off into the realm of homosexuality, if not the overtly erotic. However, while Clarissa seems to view her relationship with Sally as natural, even healthy, as a result of their mutual coming of age and the subsequent looming need to seek husbands. She brushes her hair, an action which deliberately provokes her memories of preparing to meet Sally. Septimus sees his relationship with Evans as something to forget, though it is impossible for him to do so completely, as Evans haunts not only his past, but his present temporality. To act in a way which disturbs his temporal positioning would only compound Septimus’s suffering.

Why the difference between these two homosocial experiences? Sedgwick offers an explanation in *Between Men*: “There is an asymmetry in our present society between, on the one hand, the relatively continuous relation of female homosocial and homosexual bonds, and, on the other hand, the radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds.” (Sedgwick 4-5). Clarissa’s relationship with Sally is shaped by this relation of homosocial and homosexual bonds: while the lines seem to blur between homosociality and homosexuality in the case of Sally and Clarissa, the lines are not allowed to blur in the case of Septimus and Evans. For the masculine experience, the

lines of homosociality and homosexuality are not allowed to converge. He is no longer seen as a whole man by either Rezia or Holmes, because of his failure to conform to normative masculinity, which by default *must* be heterosexual. It is here that Septimus struggles with his transgression of heteronormativity, to the point where he can no longer live within the world. Septimus's horror of the physician Holmes is one of the motivators for his eventual suicide. However, it is not only Holmes that horrifies him, but human nature, which Holmes represents for him. Septimus reflects, "Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes [is] on you...Human nature is remorseless" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 83). Human nature can be read as the need to conform to masculinity, the need to conform to heterosexuality, the need to maintain homosociality. On all these fronts, Septimus falls short. Inside this prison, Septimus cannot act in any truly free way.

Even inside his own apartment, Septimus remains confined by his knowledge of Holmes, fearing Holmes will come through the door and "get him." (126). He has only one choice: "There remained only...the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out... Holmes...liked that sort of thing... But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings? Holmes was at the door." (126-127). Septimus is almost bored by the idea of killing himself: the idea of committing suicide is not dramatized, but is a task, a laborious task that Septimus would rather put off. He does not want to kill himself at this moment. The reminder of human beings, and by extension, human nature, creates a traumatic break in his thoughts. Holmes' entrance, as the ultimate arbiter of human nature, forces Septimus to kill himself: "'I'll give it you!' he cried, and

flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings. 'The coward!' cried Dr. Holmes, bursting the door open" (127). Septimus believes that Holmes *wants*, needs him to kill himself. By committing suicide, he escapes from the homosocial standards which trap him. Holmes's entrance itself is a violent one, a violent breaching. Holmes marks his suicide as an act of cowardice, one last betrayal of masculinity. Septimus finds the demands of human nature to be intolerable: he can no longer live in the world of Dr. Holmes. His fall onto the area railings is a fall that unites him once more with Evans; the area railings mirror the railings of the park, where he looked and saw Evans. Septimus's fall allows him to pass beyond the barrier of temporality as he escapes the world which kept him so imprisoned.

This moment of tragic escape is a moment which bridges not only life and death, but the disparate experiences of Clarissa and Septimus. At her party, Clarissa hears the news that Septimus has killed himself, and around her, the chatter stops. She goes into a small outside room, to think about the news:

A young man had killed himself...A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed 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... But this young man who had killed himself— had he plunged holding his treasure?" 'If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy,' she had said to herself once, coming down, in white. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 156)

Clarissa feels the hollowness of her own life at the news. The chatter of her empty marriage weighs on her: she feels as though Septimus has been able to escape that hollowness. Eileen Barrett argues, "With Septimus's tragic suicide, Woolf condemns her

culture's silencing of homosexuality and its insistence on heterosexuality" (154). This silencing, for Septimus and Clarissa, takes on the totalizing form of the closet: airless, suffocating. When she hears the news of Septimus's suicide, Clarissa recalls her hidden feelings for Sally, which she still preserves, and she wonders if Septimus fell holding onto such a treasure himself. (Unfortunately, his loss of Evans and subsequent closeting suggest otherwise). Clarissa's feelings of kinship create a moment of connection with Septimus, for while she does not know why Septimus jumped, her own experiences of the closet lends Clarissa insight. Sally's kiss is her treasure, and though she does not know Septimus's past, this moment encompasses Clarissa's present, altering it. This moment is one which troubles the temporal and the spacial, a queer moment which reaches beyond the boundaries of the closet, to unite even beyond death. She is able to sympathize, to see herself in Septimus, even though she does not know him: "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" (158). Despite the fact that Septimus has already died, she understands why he did it. Unlike Holmes, who calls Septimus a coward, Clarissa extends human warmth and sympathy, opening up possibilities for a different view of human nature entirely. This moment of ecstasy joins both the dead Septimus and the living Clarissa, uniting them within the experience of the closet.

Both Septimus and Clarissa struggle with the force of compulsory heterosexuality, which compels them to remain within the closet. Woolf's overlapping narrative encourages the queer moment, subverting the boundaries of order and time. Through the breaching of linear narratives, the action of the queer moment opens up the possibility of non-straight narratives. For Clarissa, her previous feelings for her friend

Sally stir dissatisfaction at the hollowness of her current marriage to Richard Dalloway, and distaste in the way she is only known as Mrs. Dalloway, and never as Clarissa; these moments of her past alter her actions in the present. Meanwhile, Septimus fears the specter of his friend Evans, whose ghostly presence is both an echo of the horrors of World War I, and a constant reminder of Septimus's failure to conform to the patriarchal and homophobic standards of homosociality. Septimus's suicide is not dramatic, but understated, a reaction to the toxic masculinity of Dr. Holmes. Clarissa is the only character who understands why Septimus killed himself. Septimus's and Clarissa's shared experiences of compulsory heterosexuality and closeting span the gap between their socioeconomic backgrounds and ages in acts of disorder and insight which breaks through closet doors. This queer moment allows for sympathetic communication through this breach, fostered by temporal ecstasy.

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