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Septimus Smith Had to Die: An Examination of Virginia Woolf's Frustration with the Mental Health System After WWI

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* was started in 1922, which is when research and studies about men diagnosed with shell shock began coming out to the general population. Those suffering from mental health issues began seeking out current treatments from medical health professionals because of the attention shell shock patients were receiving. The British Army had 80,000 cases of documented shell shock in soldiers after World War I, leading to the uptick in research and awareness being brought to this mental health disorder (Bourke). Many British citizens had friends and family members who suffered from shell shock, including Woolf's friend and famous soldier poet, Siegfried Sassoon, and to meet this immediate need for help, treatments had to be created with what little knowledge the researchers had on mental health issues (Bourke). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus Smith struggles with shell shock after returning from World War I. The character of Septimus demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the contemporary treatments that doctors used for shell shock. Woolf used Septimus to talk about mental health and that it had to be treated differently than what was currently happening. She showed that the current treatments and definitions were ineffective and hurt the patient more than helped them by writing Septimus struggling with his own mental health and the experiences he went through when undergoing treatment.

The characteristics of shell shock outlined by the 1922 *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into "Shell Shock"* allowed the public to see what the treatments for the patients are being based upon. The *Report* considered shell shock to be "emotional shock" that was "acute" or "develop[ed] slowly" because of a "terrifying experience" or "prolonged strain" to the emotions in a man returning from war (92). The authors of the *Report* also compared shell shock to "the usual feminine outbursts," which Woolf took great offense to because of her struggle with her mental health (34). As Thomas Sue discusses, Woolf's writing of Septimus as a way to express her "anger" at the prescribed bed rest and isolation cures for her "mental breakdowns" in 1913 and 1915 (49). These same cures mirror what the *Report* was recommending for shell shock patients. The *Report* made it clear that the patient "must put in a real effort of will" in order to heal and the doctor would use persuasion to get the patient to "make the effort necessary to overcome the disability" (128). The treatments being given to these patients did not take into account the trauma they went through; the doctors were domineering instead of allowing the patients to voice their concerns about what was going on in their brains and that caused the patients to believe everything was their fault and nothing could be done to help their conditions.

The first instance Septimus comes into the novel, he is struggling with his mental health. Woolf's stream of consciousness writing style in *Mrs. Dalloway* lends itself to express Septimus' mind and what is racing through it. When walking down the street with his wife, Septimus' mind jumps from "boys on bicycles" to a belief that the world "threatened to burst into flames" (Woolf 15). He is only shaken out of this cycle of thoughts by his wife telling him to keep walking, to which he responds "angrily, as if she interrupted him" (Woolf 15). The moment Woolf introduced the character of Septimus, his train of thought was unlike the other characters in the

novel. Arthur Bethea, author of “Septimus Smith, the War-Shattered Christ Substitute in *Mrs. Dalloway*,” explains that Septimus is “shattered by war” and struggles to express himself in a way that others can understand the trauma he went through during the war (249). Septimus needs help from someone who understands what he is going through and Woolf uses the stream of consciousness style to get that point across. His low mental health can be seen by going deeply inside his mind and understanding that Woolf wrote him this way as a cry for help for every person struggling with their mental health during that time period.

Septimus’ internal and external dialogue shows his lack of understanding of the social acceptability of killing others in war. Woolf understood why shell shock patients had so many issues when coming back from war and used Septimus’ mental struggle to express that. Septimus’ continual repetition of “I have committed a crime,” indicates that his transition back into society has not been a smooth one and the trauma of the war is still there (Woolf 96). Septimus does not fully understand that killing in war is accepted, whereas killing someone on the street is thought of as murder. He is unable to make that distinction in his own mind because of the trauma of killing other men in WWI. The article “I Must Tell the Whole World,” by Riley Floyd, outlines Woolf’s use of Septimus as her messenger and discusses his understanding that “killing is illegal,” but he had to kill during the war (1474). Septimus is unable to comprehend what he did in the war, which further emphasizes his trauma and Septimus’ inability to distinguish between what is legal in the sphere of war and what is legal in the regular world. Floyd continues to analyze Septimus and claims that these thoughts are because of Septimus’ “inability to feel” the trauma that happened to him when he was in the war (Floyd 1482). Woolf’s writing of Septimus’ internal and external struggle shows his confusion in the transition

back to society's laws and customs, as well as the lack of explanation for his trauma that anyone around him is giving.

Septimus' lack of feeling when experiencing emotionally draining moments demonstrates the struggle soldiers with shell shock have after living through traumatic events. Septimus struggles with his emotions, especially when his close friend, Evans, passes away, and Septimus "was far from showing any emotion" (Woolf 86). In fact, Woolf wrote that Septimus "congratulated himself on feeling very little" and watched as all the shells fell on his fellow soldiers with "indifference" (86). Septimus' lack of feeling was not evident to him until after he got off the battlefield and the trauma began to sink into his brain. Even getting engaged and married to his wife, Lucrezia, was an affair that caused Septimus to realize "he could not feel" (Woolf 86). The lack of emotion he has comes from the trauma of war and adds to his diagnosis of shell shock. Karen DeMeester, author of "Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*," claims that Woolf's writing of Septimus this way is indicative of a "traumatic injury and obstruction of grief" that he is going through (658). The article goes on to support Woolf's writing in protest of the treatment of people with mental health issues by observing that Septimus struggled because of "his inability to give meaning to that suffering" he sustained during the war (DeMeester 658). Septimus is characterized as unfeeling in order to express the issue with society not acknowledging the trauma most soldiers went through during the war. The "societal cruelty" that Septimus endures when going in public and being treated by doctors reflects how the public sees those with mental health issues (Floyd 251). Septimus needs someone to tell him it is okay to not understand why things happen and allow him to share with others his war experiences in order to "give meaning and purpose" to something that seems purposeless (DeMeester 659). Writing Septimus in this way went against what the *Report* was telling the

public, but it expresses distaste with the way mental health patients were being treated, and shows the detrimental effects of those treatments.

Septimus understands that he must communicate his feelings and ideas, but struggles to do that in a way that others understand him. The way Septimus communicates exemplifies the frustration those with mental health issues experience when telling others what they are going through. Septimus understands that “communication is health; communication is happiness” when trying to express himself to Rezia, but is unable to communicate what he has gone through and why it affects him (93). Rezia becomes “wild with terror” though, and sends her maid to get Dr. Holmes, Septimus’ doctor who is treating him for shell shock (Woolf 93). By sending for Holmes, Rezia ignores Septimus’ attempts at communication instead of giving him an opportunity to talk about the thoughts he is dealing with and then figure out how to process them. DeMeester supports verbal processing and believes the other processes during that time “silences and marginalizes war veterans,” as well as “aggravates...psychological damage” from war trauma (649). Septimus struggles with his verbal communication skills, but is able to write as much as he can to get out his thoughts.

Septimus uses writing and drawing to demonstrate how he copes with his trauma and how he can communicate in a healthy way to his wife. Rezia indulges this, but does not always ask Septimus what makes him decide to write everything down. Septimus’ only way of rationalizing the things he thinks about is drawing “diagrams” and “designs,” as well as writing “odes to Time” and “messages from the dead” (Woolf 147-48). It allows him to express himself in a way society does not want him to. Kristin Czarnecki, author of “Melted Flesh and Tangled Threads,” discusses her thoughts on Septimus’ communication skills and praises Rezia for trying to understand Septimus when he “gives her messages on torn up scraps of paper” (64). Rezia

even goes so far as to make sure the papers are safe and “tie[s] them up...with a piece of silk” to ease Septimus’ mind (Woolf 148). Woolf uses Rezia as a character who is on Septimus’ side and truly wants the best treatment for him. Rezia is the only character who tries to understand what Septimus is going through instead of brushing him off and creating a treatment that is thought to be the best. The actions of Rezia model what society should do instead of “avoid[ing] and deny[ing] the truth of veterans’ testimonies” (DeMeester 660). Rezia does still struggle though with Septimus’ mental health status and how it affects her lifestyle.

The character of Rezia expresses the feelings spouses of war veterans have, as well as the lack of understanding that the general public has for those suffering from shell shock or mental health issues. She does her best to treat Septimus the way the doctors suggest, but still cannot understand what he is suffering from and how to best help him. When the two of them are resting in the park and Septimus becomes lost in his own head, Rezia becomes frustrated and believes that she “would rather have him dead” than in this state (Woolf 23). As a character, Rezia shows how easy it is to go along with what society is saying and put all those struggling with mental health in a home or asylums to keep them out of the public eye. Rezia is so frustrated that nothing she has done is working and that Septimus continues to “[make] things terrible” when “he stared...and did not see her” (Woolf 23). Rezia is unable to understand what Septimus has gone through in the war and how the trauma has affected his brain. Czarnecki observes “Rezia’s terror that someone might see Septimus acting strangely” in public and Rezia’s inability to stop the doctors from trying to “hide [Septimus] away in a sanitarium” (72). Septimus’ mental health is something that affects Rezia and her lifestyle significantly. She is unable to go out without worrying about him and when she is out with Septimus, she worries about what others are going to say. Sabine Sautter-Léger, author of “Railed in by a Maddening Reason,” observes that

Septimus “becomes introverted to such a degree that he loses his ability to act socially” and this causes Rezia to be angry and does think that it might be better if Septimus was not there. Rezia’s behavior exemplifies the influence that doctors and society has on those around people struggling with their mental health.

Dr. Holmes’ character shows Woolf’s displeasure with the current medical practitioners and the way they have decided to treat their patients of shell shock. Septimus is never able to recover from his shell shock, even though he is attended by a professional doctor who uses the current treatments. The first time Dr. Holmes comes to see Septimus, he says “there was nothing whatever the matter” with Septimus and prescribes some rest and fresh air (Woolf 90). This causes Septimus to feel even worse about himself and makes him think he has “no excuse whatsoever” to be acting the way he has been (Woolf 91). Septimus knows he needs help because he is not acting himself, but the doctor will not acknowledge the trauma Septimus has gone through. Sue writes that “Holmes...does not believe in mental illness” as seen through his reactions to Septimus’ mental state (50). Sue goes on to say that everything Holmes has done is “in accord with contemporary medical practices in relation to shell shock” and Woolf wanted to write how wrongly it could go (54). Woolf wanted to make the doctors of her novel out to be the villain because that is how she was treated when she underwent her mental breakdowns. Septimus had to be the unfortunate victim to show what the treatments were actually doing to mental health patients.

Woolf writes Holmes as dismissive of Septimus’ mental illness to show that the current treatments for those struggling with mental health are detrimental. Holmes continues to visit Septimus, brushing off Septimus’ symptoms and mental health each time. The second time Holmes visits Septimus, the doctor insists that “health in largely a matter within our own

control” and makes Septimus feel as though he is not trying hard enough to get better by “throwing himself into outside interests” (Woolf 91). As Septimus does not get any better, Rezia calls Holmes for a third visit, and Septimus refuses to see him. Holmes gives Rezia “a friendly push” in order to get inside Septimus’ bedroom and tell Septimus that he is “in a funk” and needs to get out of it (Woolf 92). Rezia finally understands that Holmes is not helping Septimus’ condition, but Holmes so clearly believes that what he is doing is correct, that he will stop at nothing to try and “help” his patient. Czarnecki claims that Holmes is “determined to deny or ignore war’s impact on its former soldiers” in order to keep the world as it is (64). Woolf wants the world to realize that it must change its ways in order to help those who are struggling with trauma and the after effects of it. Septimus is the example that patients are not being treated the way they should be and doctors must change what the current treatments are.

Sir William Bradshaw is the second doctor Septimus sees, but Woolf characterizes Bradshaw as the real villain in this novel. All of Bradshaw’s tactics are taken straight out of the *Report*, including a domineering nature when addressing a patient, bed rest, and isolation in an asylum. At first, Bradshaw is written to seem as though he cares about Septimus and immediately understands that Septimus is suffering from “complete physical and nervous breakdown” (Woolf 95). Bradshaw condemns what Holmes has done and assures Rezia that Septimus is in good hands with him. After talking with Septimus for a few minutes, Bradshaw takes Rezia aside and asks if Septimus has mentioned killing himself. Rezia says that he has, “but he does not mean it” and Bradshaw agrees (Woolf 96). He tells Rezia the best thing for Septimus is “rest, rest, rest” and that Bradshaw has a “delightful home down in the country” where Septimus can get that rest (Woolf 96). Woolf includes this dialogue to show that Bradshaw knows exactly what to say in order to get patients with mental health issues to listen to

him. Septimus feels alone in this because no one understands what he has gone through and his anger with Holmes and Bradshaw “illustrates the conflict between the veteran and his community” (DeMeester 660). Neither of the doctors, nor the public, are trying to understand what Septimus and other shell shock patients went through by asking them about the trauma they suffered during the war. Septimus is written as being so misunderstood by the characters around him that it drives him further away from mental stability and instead into an unhealthy mental state.

Bradshaw’s internal dialogue about mental health patients is written very deliberately because it is what most mental health patients experienced in the real world with their own doctors due to the findings in the *Report*. Once Septimus and Rezia leave Bradshaw’s home, Bradshaw reflects upon the visit and congratulates England on “seclud[ing] her lunatics” and penalis[ing] despair” all in the name of “proportion” (Woolf 99). Bradshaw also focuses on conversion, with the goal of “overrid[ing] the opposition” and “shut[ting] people up,” all in the name of having a person that is the same as everyone around them (Woolf 102). Woolf uses Bradshaw’s thoughts to make him into a villainous character that hurts Septimus more than helps him. Bradshaw prevents Septimus from “giv[ing] meaning to his war experiences” by ordering only bed rest and isolation from everyone but Rezia (DeMeester 662). Septimus needs to vocalize what he has gone through and begin to create healthy relationships with others in order to share his trauma in a safe way. The treatment that he is currently going through does not allow that, instead it causes him to only contemplate his situation instead of “think[ing] as little about [him]self as possible,” which is what Bradshaw encourages (Woolf 99). Sharing experiences and relying on others to help get through a mental break is the best treatment, not isolation from

everyone. Septimus' mental state after following the doctors' orders exemplifies what can happen when following the current treatments for shell shock patients.

Septimus listens to what the doctors say, but it does not improve his mental health whatsoever because it is more important to society to make sure everyone sticks to the status quo than to take care of people who need help. It actually hurts Septimus more than helps him because he loses the ability to communicate with anyone except Rezia. Septimus is unable to talk about his trauma with other veterans who has gone through the same thing due to his isolation prescription. Instead, he "[lies] on the sofa in the sitting room," unable to figure out if what he sees is real, or just an illusion (Woolf 139). Woolf shows that rest and isolation are treatments that do not work for those suffering from shell shock. Doctors prescribe these treatments to keep the soldiers out of the public eye and avoid "a sense of instability and confusion in the community," along with "feelings of disorientation" about the trauma of World War I (DeMeester 660). Septimus struggles to make sense of what is around him because he has no one to talk with him about what he is going through or share the same experiences he went through. All of the treatment prescribed to Septimus is "society's impulse to bully outsiders into conformity," instead of trying to understand what someone struggling is going through (Bethea 151). Septimus is Woolf's messenger of what she underwent when being treated for mental breakdowns and her own struggling mental health. Her writing of Septimus getting slightly better talking to Rezia, then lapsing back into a manic state without her, exemplifies how frustrated Woolf was with the isolation and bed rest constantly given to patients who needed something else.

The treatment of isolation is detrimental to Septimus, as well as other mental health patients undergoing this treatment. Near the end of Septimus' life, Rezia decides that she will

never give him over to Bradshaw where Septimus will have to live alone. After one of Septimus' last outburst of illusions, Rezia tells him that "nothing should separate them" in order to reassure him that he will get better with her there (Woolf 148). Woolf has Rezia come to this realization right before Septimus dies to show that society comes to its senses about those struggling with mental health too late. By allowing detrimental treatments to continue, instead of allowing these people to talk about their trauma with someone, it drives shell shock victims to a point of no return. Septimus' mind is a "stream of incongruous and disconnected images and bits of memory devoid of the connections and relationships necessary to give them meaning," (DeMeester 653). His mind is not easy to understand to an outside person unless he is listened to and discusses his trauma with someone who will truly listen instead of brush it off. Septimus' disjointed mind is an opportunity to show what he, and other shell shock victims are going through; the chaos of their minds and the inability to express the hardships in a way that others understand. Septimus ultimately takes his own life because the doctors were not trying to understand him, instead forcing him into things that he did not want to do.

Septimus Smith is characterized as a man who enjoyed his life right before he committed suicide and Woolf used him to express unhappiness with the treatments given to those needing help with their mental health. Septimus' doctors pushed him into treatment that was incorrect for him, as well as downplaying the severity of his mental state. The moment Septimus hears Holmes coming up the stairs, he immediately looks at the "nice clean bread knife," "the gas fire," and finally lands on "the large Bloomsbury-lodging house window" as means to kill himself in order to get away from Holmes' treatment (Woolf 149). Right before Septimus "flung himself vigorously, violently" out the window and onto the "area railings," he thinks that "life is good" and that "he did not want to die" (Woolf 149). It was the possibility of Holmes' treating

Septimus incorrectly for his mental illness that caused Septimus to jump out of a window. Woolf made the doctor into the cause of Septimus' hardship to show that the mental healthcare providers of this time were not doing a good job and actually were hurting their patients.

Septimus still decides to jump because it gets him away from Holmes, even though "Septimus appears to be sane right before he takes his life" (Bethea 251). He leaves behind his wife that struggled to take care of him, as well as doctors who pushed him over the edge. This is Woolf's true message through the character of Septimus Smith; the current treatments for those with mental health issues are causing more hurt than good, and terrible things happen because of it.

Virginia Woolf deliberately included an extreme case of shell shock in *Mrs. Dalloway* to express her discontent with the way those with mental health issues are treated. With at least 80,000 soldiers coming back to England that suffered from shell shock, Septimus was a character that many families and soldiers could relate to. His struggle until the end of his life brought many other soldiers' hardships to light and started a conversation on the topic of war trauma and mental health that was not originally there. Woolf used the characters around Septimus Smith as a way to show what she herself went through, as well as those suffering from mental health issues. The character of Septimus is an example to the public of what soldiers are suffering from and how detrimental the treatment they are receiving actually is.

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