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## *Mrs. Dalloway: Voicing the Terror of a Post-War Society*

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### **Abstract**

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf expresses the terror experienced by a society whose ideas about war, gender, morality and religion have changed dramatically after World War I. Woolf gives voice to the terror experienced by Septimus Warren Smith, a character who has first-hand knowledge of the brutalities of war. Moreover, she depicts the horror of conventional-minded people who cannot tolerate the male and female figures defying the established gender norms based on the idea of the superiority of men. Woolf also regards religious scepticism as a means of terror threatening the authority of the Church. Things associated with war and destruction, like physical deformity, old age and death, are the other causes of the horror discussed in the novel. The present study examines the sources of terror in *Mrs. Dalloway* in order to show that Woolf focuses on the psychological, political, social and individual aspects of the horror felt by a post-war society.

### **Keywords**

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, war, terror, society, morality, gender, religion

Written after World War I, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) gives voice to the horrors of the post-war society forced to revise its socio-political and cultural values. Virginia Woolf reflects the stifling atmosphere of the post-war society through the presentation of a single day and reveals the terror suppressed in the subconscious of people whose traditional notions of patriotism, religion, womanhood/manhood, death and age underwent a drastic change. The aim of the present study is to examine the sources of terror in *Mrs Dalloway* in order to show that the terror felt by the post-war society has psychological, political, social and cultural aspects.

Terror is explained basically as “a person, situation or thing that makes you afraid” or “violent action or the threat of violent action that is intended to cause fear, usually for political purposes” (Hornby 2000, 1342). According to Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, the writers of *Political Terrorism*, terror is “a state of chronic fear ... [caused] [t]hrough previous use of violence or the credible threat of violence” (2005, 1-2; emphasis in the original). Although aspects of terror change in each definition, the common element in these definitions is that terror is related with a negative and disturbing feeling, usually the feeling of fear, and thus it is not something desirable. Virginia Woolf also presents the various political, social and individual aspects of terror in *Mrs Dalloway*. The political aspect of terror is associated with the horror of the war. In World War I (1914-1918), at least ten million people lost their lives and nearly twenty one million people were injured (Westmoreland 2013, 172). Having felt the horror of war acutely, modernist writers underline in their works the decline of patriotism, the collapse of romantic and heroic images about war and imperialism, and also “the fragility of language and of the human subject” (Greenblatt, *et al.* 2006, 1840). Virginia Woolf, a modernist writer, also emphasises the futility of war having personally witnessed the brutality of World War I: her two distant cousins and her husband’s brother were killed on the battlefield. The air raids during the war also made her hold poor opinions about war and fighting.

*Mrs Dalloway* encapsulates the temperament of a post-war society. The whole story takes place within a single day and it is largely based on the preparations for the eponymous character's party. Behind the preparations lay the anxiety, timidity, restlessness and uncertainty of individuals who try to find a place in a society whose façade has been changed after the war. In the novel, Woolf spares no one from feeling the terror of the recent past: "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing." (Woolf 2013, 13). Woolf shows that although war came to an end, its effects on individual lives can still be observed. While Mrs Dalloway is at a flower shop, a "violent explosion" sounding like "a pistol shot" is heard outside: this explosion "made Mrs Dalloway jump" (Woolf 2013, 17) and the passer-by "stopped and stared" (Woolf 2013, 18). Even after it is understood that there is no actual explosion but that the sound is of a motor car, "in all the hat shops and tailors' shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire" (Woolf 2013, 21). It is clear that people have not yet overcome the shock of war because the horror they feel deep-down surfaces on hearing an explosion. However, this horror is mixed with patriotic feelings as the explosion does not only recall a time of terror but also a time of faith, loyalty and glory. Mr Bowley also experiences the same confused feeling on seeing the Queen's car pass in front of people. The grandeur of the car "lifted some flag flying in the British breast of Mr Bowley" (Woolf 2013, 23), but the poor women waiting to see the Queen makes him remember the persons victimised by the War: "poor women, nice little children, orphans [and] widows" (Woolf 2013, 23). Richard Dalloway, on the other hand, is stripped of the romantic illusions about the war as he associates it with "thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shovelled together, already half forgotten" (Woolf 2013, 118). Mrs Dalloway's aunt Miss Helena Parry, who visited India in the 1860s, is also realistic about the destructive effects of the war: "[S]he had no tender memories, no proud illusions about Viceroy, Generals, Mutinies ...

. [She was] an indomitable Englishwoman, fretful if disturbed by the War, say, which dropped a bomb at her very door, from her deep meditation over orchids” (Woolf 2013, 181-82). For Miss Parry, war means bombing and bombing means disturbance of her domestic peace, therefore she does not consider war something to be glorified, but she regards it unpleasant and disturbing.

Although each character feels the horror of war to some extent, it is Septimus Warren Smith who feels the terror of the war most deeply. Having fought in World War I as a soldier, Septimus suffers from shell shock, which is a mental disorder, whose symptoms “were paralyses, blindness, deafness, mutism, speech disorders and tremors” as well as “irritability, dizziness, insomnia or nightmares [and] anxiety” (Stryker 2005, 157). Septimus experiences especially the psychological symptoms of this mental disorder as he has strange hallucinations about dead people:

He lay on the sofa and made her [his wife] hold his hand to prevent him from falling down, down, he cried, into the flames! and saw faces laughing at him, calling him horrible disgusting names, from the walls, and hands pointing round the screen. Yet they were quite alone. But he began to talk aloud, answering people, arguing, laughing, crying, getting very excited and making her write things down. (Woolf 2013, 70)

The horrific images of war casualties make Septimus feel psychologically disturbed. His mental disturbance can be explained in psychological terms. In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud provides a psychological explanation for the shock experienced after a great and traumatic experience. Freud argues that people having experienced a devastating event cannot express their horror instantly. Instead, they tend to suppress it till it gets too overwhelming to be repressed (2014 [1939], 110). Freud calls this stage “incubation period” (2014 [1939], 109). He also claims that an incident similar to the traumatic occasion

experienced formerly may stimulate the previous fears to surface (2014 [1939], 122). He develops his argument further by saying that if people dwell too much on the past traumatic experience, they may find it hard to “deal with life” (2014 [1939], 124). Freud also studies the dreams of the veterans and concludes that as they are fixed too much on the past traumatic memories of war, they get isolated from the outer world and they seem to be “fixated upon some very definite part of their past .... [and] completely estranged both from the present and the future” (1920 [1917], 236). Moreover, he discusses “compulsion neurosis” whose symptoms are listed in “The Meaning of Symptoms” (1917):

[T]he patient is occupied by thoughts that in reality do not interest him ... The thoughts may be absurd in themselves or thoroughly indifferent to the individual, often they are absolutely childish and in all cases they are the result of strained thinking, which exhausts the patient, who surrenders himself to them most unwillingly. (1920 [1917], 222)

Freud also associates war trauma with sex. He claims that veterans “were not simply driven mad *by* the war; they were traumatized because the trauma of the war had undone their deepest fantasies of themselves as peacetime masculine subjects” (quoted in Stonebridge 2009, 197; emphasis in the original). The veterans, who returned home physically weak and deformed, felt they lost their masculine charm, and thus they were unable to attract the attention of the opposite sex.

War means death, destruction, horror, humiliation, brutality for Septimus and his war experiences are so devastating that he thinks he hears “the voices of the dead” and “the cries of the people seeking and not finding, and passing further and further away” (Woolf 2013, 148). The fact that he experiences post-war trauma can be understood by Freud’s explanation for the shock experienced after a traumatic event. Having witnessed the murder of many innocent people during the war, including his fellow soldiers, Septimus suffers from psychological

trauma. His traumatic war experiences force him to remain isolated from people and to occupy his anxious mind full of distressful memories of human suffering with trivial things like looking at “irregular houses hazed in smoke,” listening to “the traffic hummed in a circle,” watching “dun-coloured animals stretched long necks over the Zoo palings” (Woolf 2013, 28). He also tries to relieve his mind by talking repetitively about “[t]he supreme secret” (Woolf 2013, 71) he must tell the whole humankind. Septimus wants to say “first that trees are alive; next there is no crime; next love, universal love” (Woolf 2013, 71). However, his struggles prove to be futile as his terror is doubled by the forcing power of “human nature” condemning him for his past sins:

So there was no excuse; nothing whatever the matter, except the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst; but all the other crimes raised their heads and shook their fingers and jeered and sneered over the rail of the bed in the early hours of the morning at the prostrate body which lay realising its degradation; how he had married his wife without loving her; had lied to her; seduced her; outraged Miss Isabel Pole, and was so pocked and marked with vice that women shuddered when they saw him in the street. The verdict of human nature on such a wretch was death. (Woolf 2013, 94)

Septimus is conscious about the fact that he committed sin by being indifferent towards his comrade’s death and other war casualties, by deceiving women and by being dishonest about his feelings towards his wife. However, he points to the injustice of human nature sentencing the weak and the helpless to suffering and death: “Septimus cr[ie]d out about human cruelty — how they tear each other to pieces. The fallen, he said, they tear to pieces” (Woolf 2013, 144). Septimus is so pervaded by the human nature which reminds him of his mischiefs that he delineates it through horrific images: according to him human nature is

“the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils” (Woolf 2013, 96) and it is “remorseless” (Woolf 2013, 101).

The fact that war is merciless and indifferent to human sufferings is another source of terror for Septimus. With its “prying and insidious ... fingers” (Woolf 2013, 89) the European War appears as a monster that “smashed a plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds, and utterly ruined the cook’s nerves at Mr Brewer’s establishment at Muswell Hill” (Woolf 2013, 89). Septimus also associates the war with traumatic scenes: “[M]en were trapped in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud)” (Woolf 2013, 93). The terror of war which comes to life through these terrible images makes Septimus understand the true nature of humankind. He would explain ‘how wicked people were; how he could see them making up lies as they passed in the street. He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the meaning of the world, he said.’” (Woolf 2013, 70). The horror of war and the brutal side of human nature shatter the romantic vision he had previously held: “The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive” (Woolf 2013, 90). The terror Septimus experiences becomes so overwhelming that he finds no other solution but to commit suicide.

The trauma experienced by Septimus is also related with sex. He returns from war as a veteran who has lost his mental health along with his self-confidence in his manly qualities. As he is no longer strong and courageous, he thinks he is not the man with whom his wife fell in love. His wife Rezia considers his desire to kill himself as something “cowardly” (Woolf 2013, 27) and she starts to remember the days when Septimus was not a coward but “a young hawk” and a “clever” man having “a beautiful fresh colour” (Woolf 2013, 149). Septimus gets frustrated deep down to see his wife’s disappointment with him, especially when he sees

that she has removed her wedding ring: “Their marriage was over, he thought, with agony, with relief. The rope was cut ... (since his wife had thrown away her wedding ring; since she had left him)” (Woolf 2013, 71). The feelings of Septimus about his marriage are confused as he feels agony to see that he has lost his wife’s love and passion for him, but he feels relieved to understand that he does not have to feel sorry for her any more for not being a passionate and tender husband.

Death, old age and physical deformity are considered taboos in the novel because they are associated with war and destruction. These taboos are repressed in the subconscious only to surface in the private moments in which individuals can face their secret fears. Mrs Dalloway is fifty two years old, but she denies having grown older because she cannot bear to accept that she does not look young and pretty any more (Woolf 2013, 40). Clarissa Dalloway also tries to suppress “her horror of death” (Woolf 2013, 156) by adopting “a transcendental theory which ... allowed her to believe ... the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death ... perhaps — perhaps” (Woolf 2013, 156). She struggles to reconcile herself with the idea of death through believing that even if one’s body decays after death, he or she still continues to exist in the memory of the living. In order to mitigate her horror of death Clarissa also engages herself with giving home parties, which prevents herself from feeling alone and thinking about death: “Both of them [Peter and Richard] criticised her very unfairly, laughed at her very unjustly, for her parties. ... [But] [w]hat she liked was simply life. ‘That’s what I do it for,’ she said, speaking aloud, to life” (Woolf 2013, 124). Clarissa considers her parties as occasions making her feel vivacious as she has people around her who testify her existence. However, when she hears about Septimus’s death in her party, she cannot help feeling the terror of death: “A young man had killed himself. And they talked of it at her party — the Bradshaws, talked of death. He had killed himself — but how? Always

her body went through it first, when she was told, suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt” (Woolf 2013, 187). For Clarissa the mention of death is something terrible that consumes her life energy and fills her heart with a pure terror: “Then ... there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one’s parents giving it into one’s hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear” (Woolf 2013, 188). The fact that she cannot avoid death and do anything to disturb the circle moving from life to death makes her terrified. Peter Walsh also shares the same terror. He denies getting older because old age means being much closer to death: “It was her [Clarissa’s] heart, he remembered; and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death that surprised in the midst of life, Clarissa falling where she stood, in her drawing-room. No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried” (Woolf 2013, 54). The fantasy of Clarissa’s death makes Peter appalled because he and Clarissa are from the same generation and he is afraid that if Clarissa dies he will be awakened to the fact that he is not young anymore and his death is not far away. In order to keep his mind away from the notion of death Peter occupies himself with “journeys; rides; quarrels; adventures; bridge parties; love affairs [and] work” (Woolf 2013, 47). Moreover, he follows a young woman crossing Trafalgar Square, which is also a tactic of him to feel young and energetic: “Straightening himself and stealthily fingering his pocket-knife he started after her to follow this [young and attractive] woman, this excitement, which seemed even with its back turned to shed on him a light which connected them, which singled him out” (Woolf 2013, 56). It is as if Peter feeds himself on the beauty and freshness of the young woman in order to feel the excitement of youth.

World War I, associated with sorrow, chaos and death, “challenged traditional patterns of religious belief and behaviour and stimulated new expressions of religious feeling” (Hilliard 2010, 80). Having witnessed the brutalities of war on

the frontiers, some soldiers “not only questioned but ultimately lost their faith in the Christian vision of a loving and merciful God” (Snape 2005, 195). The cause of this religious change also lies in the scientific developments occurring in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Victorian faith in God and religion was shaken as a result of “scientific study, Biblical criticism, discoveries in biology and geology, and Darwinism and evolutionary theory” (Denney 2000, 35). Woolf depicts Clarissa Dalloway as a religious sceptic who has doubts about the existence of God (Woolf 2013, 81). Peter associates Clarissa’s religious scepticism to her sister’s premature death:

Oddly enough, she was one of the most thoroughgoing sceptics he had ever met, and possibly ... , [a]s we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship (her favourite reading as a girl was Huxley and Tyndall, and they were fond of these nautical metaphors), as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners (Huxley again); decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can. Those ruffians, the Gods, shan’t have it all their own way,— her notion being that the Gods, who never lost a chance of hurting, thwarting and spoiling human lives were seriously put out if, all the same, you behaved like a lady. That phase came directly after Sylvia’s death — that horrible affair. To see your own sister killed by a falling tree ... before your very eyes, a girl too on the verge of life ... was enough to turn one bitter. (Woolf 2013, 81)

Peter thinks that Clarissa Dalloway finds religious scepticism as a means to cope with the trauma she has experienced as a result of her sister’s tragic death, but her religious doubts have a scientific basis as well because Clarissa’s “favourite reading as a girl was Huxley and Tyndall” (Woolf 2013, 81). Huxley and Tyndall are two scientists who supported “scientific naturalism”, “[the] technical and

analytical thrust, the secular, rational approach” which considered science, not religion, as a means to solve problems (Farber 1998, 60). This discourse, in turn, led people to be suspicious about the power of religion and the hegemony of the church (Bowler 2001, 1). In these respects, Clarissa Dalloway can be regarded as an early-twentieth-century religious sceptic who poses a threat to the authority of the Church.

Male characters who cannot aspire to the norms established for men are also a source of terror for the patriarchal society. A Victorian gentleman is portrayed as a man who has “emotional and physical restraint, a strong moral conscience, fierce family morality, and wide ranging accomplishments” (Cochran 2010, 12). However, this image of manhood underwent a drastic change as a result of the destructive effects of the war. After having witnessed the horrors of war, men were “feminized” because they grew sentimental and displayed sense of fear (Grayzel 1999, 13, 14). Old men mourned for their dead sons, and young men not only suffered from physical wounds but also from homesickness and they revealed their longing for domestic peace in their letters (Grayzel 1999, 14, 21). The act of writing itself is a metaphor of the soldiers’ “going home” to “women and their gentleness” (Barbause quoted in Grayzel 1999, 14). Peter Walsh is a character who adopts manners which do not suit traditional gender roles. Peter, a middle-aged man, gives way to his intense emotions without any diffidence in front of Clarissa Dalloway: “[Peter] burst into tears; wept, wept without the least shame, sitting on the sofa, the tears running down his cheeks” (Woolf 2013, 50). A crying male figure is likely to be found shocking, disturbing and offensive from the conventional perspective and Peter is also aware of the impropriety of his behaviour: “But then these astonishing accesses of emotion — bursting into tears this morning, what was all that about? What could Clarissa have thought of him? Thought him a fool presumably, not for the first time” (Woolf 2013, 83). Peter knows that displaying intense emotions in public is a foolish thing to do

for men as it is regarded a sign of weakness. Since crying is not considered to be appropriate for men, Rezia Warren Smith is horrified when she sees her husband cry: “But ‘Lovely!’ he [Septimus] used to cry, and the tears would run down his cheeks, which was to her the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying” (Woolf 2013, 144). Rezia is a conventional woman who identifies manliness with bravery and stoicism; therefore she cannot bear to see her husband degrade himself from a valiant and fearless soldier into a crying man.

Virginia Woolf analyses the terror felt by individuals from different aspects in *Mrs Dalloway*. The writer shows that World War I, having a dramatic effect on human psychology with its traumatic scenes, is one reason for the terror experienced by people. Although the war does not exist physically in the novel, its terror is sensed in the society where people are restless and their nerves are set on edge at the slightest disturbance. The writer uses Septimus Warren Smith, the veteran who suffers from mental disorder, to show the deep effect of World War I on the people who had first-hand experience about the horrific side of war. Woolf also associates taboo topics like old age, physical deformity and death with the terrors of war. Showing the fact that terror does not have only one source but various sources, Woolf implies that the restlessness prevailing in the modern temperament has political, social and cultural causes.

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## Öz

### **Mrs. Dalloway: Savaş Sonrası Bir Toplumun Yaşadığı Korkunun Dillendirilmesi**

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*'de savaş, cinsiyet, ahlak ve din konusundaki fikirleri Birinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan sonra büyük ölçüde değişen bir toplumun yaşadığı korkuyu ifade eder. Woolf, savaşın yarattığı ürkütücü manzaralara bizzat şahit olan Septimus Warren Smith adındaki bir karakterin yaşadığı korkuyu anlatır. Ayrıca, toplumun belirlediği ve erkeklerin üstünlüğü fikrine dayalı cinsiyet kurallarına karşı gelmiş erkek ve kadın karakterleri hoş görmeyen geleneksel düşünce yapısına sahip insanların hissettiği korkuyu tarif eder. Bununla birlikte, Woolf, dini şüpheciliği kilisenin otoritesini tehdit eden bir korku aracı olarak ele alır. Fiziksel kusur, yaşlılık ve ölüm gibi savaş ve yıkımla ilişkilendirilen kavramlar, romanda irdelenen diğer korku unsurlarıdır. Mevcut çalışmanın amacı, Woolf'un savaş sonrası bir toplumun hissettiği korkunun psikolojik, politik, sosyal ve bireysel yönlerine odaklandığını göstermek için *Mrs. Dalloway*'deki teröre yol açan kaynakları irdelemektir.

### **Anahtar Kelimeler**

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, savaş, korku, toplum, ahlak, cinsiyet, din