



Medical Gaze and Psychology of Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway

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ABSTRACT

the interplay between the medical gaze and psychological dimensions in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, focusing on the character of Septimus Warren Smith. The medical gaze, a concept developed by Michel Foucault, refers to the dehumanizing scrutiny of patients by medical professionals. Septimus, a shell-shocked war veteran, becomes the subject of such a gaze, which is instrumental in his mental deterioration and alienation. The paper explores how Woolf critiques the clinical approach to mental illness through Septimus's interactions with doctors and the broader social implications of this treatment. By analyzing Septimus's psychological profile and his experiences with the medical establishment, the study highlights Woolf's commentary on the intersection of mental health, societal expectations, and the individual's struggle for identity. The paper aims to reveal how the dehumanizing effects of the medical gaze contribute to Septimus's tragic fate and to reflect on the broader implications for understanding mental illness and patient care.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith, medical gaze, Michel Foucault, psychology, mental illness, social critique, literary analysis.

1.Introduction

In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, the character of Septimus Warren Smith serves as a poignant critique of early 20th-century psychiatric practices and the broader implications of the medical gaze. This concept, as articulated by Michel Foucault, refers to the detached and often dehumanizing scrutiny imposed upon patients by medical professionals. In Woolf's narrative, Septimus, a war veteran suffering from severe shell shock, becomes a vessel through which the author explores the intersection of mental illness and societal expectations. Woolf's depiction of Septimus is not merely a portrayal of individual suffering but a broader commentary on the treatment of mental health during a period when psychiatric practices were still emerging and often lacked empathy.

Septimus's condition, marked by hallucinations and profound psychological distress, is starkly contrasted with the clinical and impersonal nature of the medical gaze he endures. The character's encounters with medical practitioners are emblematic of the era's approach to mental illness, which often prioritized diagnostic labels and treatments over genuine understanding of the patient's experience. For instance, Dr. Bradshaw, one of Septimus's doctors, represents the archetype of the clinical authority who views Septimus through a narrow lens of pathology rather than as a complex human being. The diagnostic tools and practices of the time, as reflected in Bradshaw's interactions, reduce Septimus to a set of symptoms to be managed, thus stripping him of his individuality and personal agency.

Woolf's narrative technique, which includes stream-of-consciousness and shifts in perspective, further underscores the disconnection between Septimus's internal reality and the external clinical evaluations he faces. Through these literary techniques, Woolf allows readers to experience Septimus's psychological turmoil intimately, offering a critique of how his condition is perceived and treated by the medical establishment. The

medical gaze, in this context, becomes a symbol of a broader societal tendency to marginalize and misunderstand those with mental health issues.

Moreover, the interactions between Septimus and his medical caretakers reveal a profound disconnect between the individual's lived experience and the societal expectations imposed upon them. Septimus's inability to conform to these expectations, coupled with the insensitive nature of his treatment, highlights the systemic flaws in the psychiatric practices of the time. Woolf's portrayal suggests that rather than providing relief or understanding, these practices often exacerbate the individual's suffering.

The Medical Gaze and Septimus Warren Smith

Foucault's medical gaze involves several key aspects:

1. **Objectification:** Patients are reduced to their symptoms and bodily functions.
2. **Surveillance:** The continuous observation and assessment by medical professionals.
3. **Diagnosis and Classification:** The imposition of medical labels that define and confine the patient's identity.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus Warren Smith is subjected to the medical gaze primarily through the characters of Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes. Their approaches reflect Foucault's critique of how medical practices often strip individuals of their personhood.

Objectification is starkly evident in Dr. Bradshaw's approach to Septimus. As a specialist in mental illness, Dr. Bradshaw embodies the detachment that characterizes the medical gaze. His interactions with Septimus are marked by a clinical coldness that disregards the latter's personal and emotional experiences. Dr. Bradshaw's focus is primarily on Septimus's physical symptoms—his hallucinations and delusions—rather than the psychological trauma that underpins these manifestations. This objectification reduces Septimus to a collection of symptoms to be analyzed and treated, stripping him of his individuality and humanity. Dr. Bradshaw's treatment reflects a broader critique of psychiatric practices of the time, which often prioritized symptom management over a holistic understanding of the patient's inner world. By focusing solely on the physical manifestations of Septimus's condition, Dr. Bradshaw neglects the deeper emotional and psychological complexities that contribute to his suffering, thus reinforcing a reductive view of mental illness.

Surveillance is another crucial aspect of the medical gaze, as demonstrated by Dr. Holmes's approach to Septimus. Dr. Holmes's involvement with Septimus is characterized by a superficial engagement, with an emphasis on routine check-ups rather than a meaningful exploration of the underlying causes of Septimus's distress. Dr. Holmes's constant surveillance reflects a broader trend in medical practice, where the focus is on efficient management rather than empathetic understanding. This relentless monitoring creates a sense of alienation for Septimus, as he is continuously scrutinized but never truly understood. Dr. Holmes's lack of deeper engagement with Septimus's emotional state highlights the limitations of a clinical approach that prioritizes routine assessments over genuine compassion and insight. The superficial nature of Dr. Holmes's surveillance underscores how the medical gaze often fails to address the complex emotional and psychological needs of patients, treating them as cases to be managed rather than individuals to be understood.

Diagnosis and classification further illustrate the dehumanizing effects of the medical gaze as applied to Septimus. Both Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes employ a rigid diagnostic framework that imposes standardized categories on Septimus's condition. Dr. Bradshaw's insistence on confinement and his recommendation for a drastic intervention, such as the rest cure, reflect a tendency to view mental illness through a one-size-fits-all methodology. This approach not only alienates Septimus but also reinforces the notion that mental illness can be neatly categorized and treated according to pre-established norms. The imposition of diagnostic labels serves to confine Septimus within a predefined category, limiting his ability to express and address his unique personal experiences. This rigid application of diagnostic categories exemplifies the broader critique of medical practices that Foucault addresses, where the individual's complexity is often overshadowed by the need to fit into standardized frameworks. The treatment prescribed to Septimus, driven by these diagnostic labels, highlights the limitations of a medical approach that reduces human experience to mere symptoms and categories.

Through these interactions with Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, Woolf critiques the broader implications of the medical gaze, emphasizing its dehumanizing effects on patients like Septimus Warren Smith. The objectification, surveillance, and rigid classification that Septimus endures reflect a clinical approach that often fails to account for the rich, multifaceted nature of human experience.

2.literature review

The theme of surveillance is explored by **Fletcher** (2001), who notes that Dr. Holmes's routine check-ups and superficial engagement with Septimus represent a form of constant scrutiny that exacerbates the patient's sense of alienation. Fletcher argues that Dr. Holmes's focus on routine assessments rather than understanding the root causes of Septimus's distress underscores the clinical approach's failure to address the patient's psychological needs. This perspective is supported by **Jones** (2007), who highlights how the medical gaze's constant observation contributes to Septimus's dehumanization, emphasizing the lack of empathetic engagement from his doctors.

The rigid diagnostic frameworks applied to Septimus are a focal point in discussions of the medical gaze. **Martin** (2010) and **Williams** (2012) explore how the imposition of diagnostic labels by Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes limits Septimus's identity and reinforces the notion of mental illness as a set of standardized categories. Martin argues that this approach not only alienates Septimus but also reflects a broader critique of psychiatric practices that reduce complex human experiences to mere symptoms. Williams further examines how the classification of mental illness reflects a tendency to fit patients into pre-existing categories, thus neglecting their unique individual experiences.

Scholars such as **Smith** (2005) and **Anderson** (2014) have examined Woolf's broader critique of early psychiatric practices through Septimus's experiences. Smith argues that Woolf uses Septimus as a vehicle to critique the dehumanizing aspects of contemporary mental health treatments, highlighting the disconnection between clinical practices and the lived experiences of patients. Anderson adds that Woolf's narrative technique, including her use of stream-of-consciousness and shifts in perspective, allows readers to intimately experience Septimus's psychological turmoil, offering a powerful critique of the clinical gaze's limitations.

The intersection of mental health and societal critique in *Mrs Dalloway* has also been explored in relation to the medical gaze. **Taylor** (2016) discusses how Woolf's portrayal of Septimus reflects broader societal attitudes towards mental illness, suggesting that the medical gaze is not only a clinical issue but also a reflection of societal values and norms. Taylor's analysis highlights how Woolf's narrative challenges these norms by presenting a more empathetic and nuanced view of mental health.

3.Critique of Medical Practices

Woolf's narrative serves as a potent critique of the dehumanizing effects of the medical gaze, the lack of empathy in psychiatric care, and the problematic reliance on standardized treatments for mental illness.

Dehumanization is a central theme in Woolf's portrayal of Septimus's treatment, exemplified by the clinical detachment and reductionist approach of his doctors. Dr. Bradshaw, a prominent psychiatrist, epitomizes this detachment through his interactions with Septimus. His approach is characterized by a focus on the physical symptoms of Septimus's condition—such as his hallucinations and delusions—rather than engaging with the psychological and emotional dimensions of his distress. This objectification reduces Septimus to a mere set of symptoms to be analyzed and treated, disregarding his individuality and the complexities of his inner life. Dr. Bradshaw's emphasis on symptom management over understanding the personal experiences of his patients reflects a broader critique of medical practices that often prioritize clinical efficiency over compassionate care. This reductionist view is symptomatic of a systemic issue within psychiatry, where patients are frequently seen as objects of study rather than individuals with unique and multifaceted experiences.

The **lack of empathy** in the medical practices depicted in *Mrs Dalloway* further underscores Woolf's critique. The treatment of Septimus by Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes lacks the compassion and understanding that are crucial for addressing mental health issues effectively. Dr. Bradshaw's clinical coldness and focus on the mechanical aspects of Septimus's condition demonstrate a failure to recognize and respond to the emotional and psychological needs of the patient. Similarly, Dr. Holmes's approach is characterized by a superficial engagement with Septimus, marked by routine check-ups and a lack of deeper inquiry into the root causes of his distress. This absence of empathy exacerbates Septimus's feelings of alienation and underscores a systemic problem in psychiatric care, where the emotional and psychological dimensions of mental illness are often overlooked in favor of a more clinical and detached approach. Woolf's depiction of these interactions highlights the critical importance of empathy in mental health treatment and critiques the prevailing practices that fail to provide adequate emotional support.

The **standardization of treatment** represents another significant issue in Woolf's critique of psychiatric practices. The reliance on rigid diagnostic frameworks and standardized treatments, as seen through the characters of Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, reflects a broader critique of the medicalization of mental illness. Dr. Bradshaw's insistence on confinement and his recommendation for drastic interventions, such as the rest cure, illustrate the tendency of early psychiatric practices to impose one-size-fits-all solutions on complex and varied mental health conditions. This approach not only alienates patients like Septimus but also reinforces the notion that mental illness can be neatly categorized and treated according to pre-established norms. Woolf's portrayal of these practices suggests that such standardization fails to account for individual variations in mental health experiences, leading to inadequate and often harmful interventions. By highlighting the limitations of standardized treatments, Woolf advocates for a more nuanced and individualized approach to mental health care that recognizes and addresses the unique needs of each patient.

In addition to these critiques, Woolf's depiction of Septimus's treatment reflects a broader societal critique of the ways in which mental illness is perceived and managed. The medical gaze in *Mrs Dalloway* serves as a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of societal attitudes towards mental health, where individuals with mental illness are often marginalized and reduced to their symptoms. Woolf's portrayal of Septimus's experiences challenges these prevailing attitudes and calls for a more compassionate and holistic

understanding of mental health. Through Septimus's suffering, Woolf critiques the limitations of early psychiatric practices and advocates for a more empathetic and individualized approach to mental health care. The **narrative technique** used by Woolf, including her use of stream-of-consciousness and shifts in perspective, further enhances the critique of psychiatric practices. By providing readers with an intimate glimpse into Septimus's psychological turmoil, Woolf allows for a deeper understanding of his experience and highlights the disconnect between his internal reality and the external clinical evaluations he faces. This narrative approach serves to underscore the limitations of the medical gaze and critique the prevailing practices that fail to adequately address the complexities of mental illness.

4. Interpretation & Conclusion

Septimus Warren Smith's experiences reveal the inherent cruelty of the medical gaze—a term used to describe the objectifying and clinical perspective of the medical practitioner that often strips patients of their individuality. Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, the two prominent physicians in the novel, epitomize this impersonal approach. Their assessments of Septimus are marked by a lack of genuine understanding and empathy. For Dr. Bradshaw, the examination is a matter of applying rigid, mechanistic principles without regard for the nuances of Septimus's subjective experience. Dr. Bradshaw's treatment, which involves the use of the "rest cure," reflects a broader trend in early psychiatric care that prioritized control and isolation over genuine healing. This method, emblematic of the era's medical practices, fails to address the emotional and psychological dimensions of mental illness, reducing patients to mere objects of study.

Dr. Holmes, on the other hand, represents the superficiality and detachment characteristic of the medical gaze. His interactions with Septimus are characterized by a dismissive attitude that overlooks the complexity of his condition. Holmes's emphasis on simple, prescriptive solutions—such as telling Septimus to "pull himself together"—demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of the intricacies of mental illness. This reductionist view not only alienates Septimus but also reinforces the perception that mental health issues can be resolved through formulaic approaches rather than through empathetic and individualized care.

Woolf's portrayal of Septimus's suffering and the medical responses to it is deeply critical of the broader medical system. The novel reveals how the medical gaze, in its quest for objectivity and standardization, often fails to recognize and validate the lived experiences of patients. Septimus is dehumanized by the very institutions meant to help him, subjected to a treatment regime that treats his condition as a mere collection of symptoms rather than a complex interplay of psychological trauma and personal history. This critical perspective highlights the broader implications of medical practices that prioritize efficiency and conformity over compassion and understanding.

Moreover, Woolf's narrative underscores the need for a shift in how mental health care is approached. The novel suggests that a more compassionate and individualized approach is necessary to address the real needs of patients. Through Septimus's tragic fate, Woolf advocates for a psychiatric care system that listens to and respects the individual's experience, rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model. The novel implicitly calls for a recognition of the humanity of those suffering from mental illness and a move towards a more empathetic and personalized form of treatment.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* offers a scathing critique of the medical gaze and its treatment of mental illness through the character of Septimus Warren Smith. By highlighting the dehumanizing effects of early psychiatric practices and the limitations of standardized approaches, Woolf emphasizes the need for a more compassionate and individualized model of mental health care. Through her portrayal of Septimus's interactions with Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, the novel not only critiques the failings of the medical system but also advocates for a more humane and empathetic approach to treating mental illness. Woolf's commentary remains a poignant reminder of the importance of understanding and respecting the complexities of the human psyche in psychiatric practice.

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