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A Mind In Fragments: Virginia Woolf's Representation Of War Trauma Through Septimus Smith In Mrs. Dalloway

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's works are deeply engaged with the theme of war. Having grown up in a household where she faced patriarchal constraints and experienced profound personal losses from an early age, she developed a deep understanding of and sympathy for not only the families of soldiers who perished in World War I but also those who returned physically intact yet psychologically scarred. One of Woolf's most masterfully crafted characters, Septimus Smith, serves as a powerful critique not only of the futility of war but also of the culture that glorifies it. Woolf portrays with great sensitivity the struggles of returning soldiers, who find themselves in a society that venerates fallen heroes while neglecting those who survive. This article examines the extent of psychological damage inflicted on Septimus and explores how, through his breakdown, Woolf mounts a modernist critique of war and its devastating impact.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Septimus Smith, War literature, War and trauma, Modernist Critique

History can be defined as the study of the human past as described in written documents left behind by humans. When constructing a detailed sequence of dates, events, causes, and consequences of a war, careful consideration must be given to what is recorded and what is omitted. This inevitably results in two versions of war history: the official version, approved and propagated by those who are in power and who control society, and the unofficial version, written by those marginalized by it. The story of Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* belongs to the latter category. Published in 1925, *Mrs Dalloway* follows a day in the life of several interconnected characters on a sunny mid-June day in 1923, London. These characters are linked through the myriad thoughts they experience. Septimus Smith is one of the novel's two major characters, the other being the titular Clarissa Dalloway. A former English soldier, Septimus has been left psychologically shattered by the war he fought in and survived four years earlier. Through his character, Woolf portrays the struggles and dilemmas of thousands of young men who returned from the war, men whose suffering would remain largely misunderstood by psychologists for nearly fifty years. The First World War was unprecedented in many ways, leaving a lasting impact on Europe. This transformation was evident in its political landscape, territorial boundaries, social structure, and even its artistic and cultural expressions. The very foundation of not only Europe but the entire world was shaken, as the war brought death and destruction on an unimaginable scale. Traditional forms of art and literature proved inadequate in expressing the profound sense of hopelessness and disillusionment that followed. They failed to capture the fragmented consciousness and confusion caused by the war. As a result, new artistic and literary forms had to be developed. The tragedy had already taken place, but what came next? People needed to make sense of the chaos, to find meaning in the devastation, in order to move forward. This need gave rise to modernist literature. As Karen De Meester states, "Modernist literature was a literature of trauma… The modernist literary works written in the decade after World War I constitute a literature of trauma: their forms often replicate the damaged psyche of a trauma survivor, and their contents often portray his characteristic disorientation and despair."

There is a notable parallel between WWI trauma survivors and modernist writers, as both experienced a profound loss of faith in the systems that once provided structure and meaning to their existence, whether in

ideological beliefs, moral values, or foundational principles. This erosion of certainty was initially precipitated by advancements in the natural sciences, such as chemistry and biology, as well as in the social sciences, particularly psychology. However, it ultimately culminated in the unprecedented and indiscriminate destruction wrought by the First World War, which served as the decisive rupture in this faith. The very technologies that had been developed to enhance and improve human life revealed an inherent potential for devastation, thereby challenging the notion of progress and exposing the fragility of modern civilization. Both trauma survivors and modernist writers were compelled to seek ways to make sense of the profound changes in the world. For trauma survivors, this need was even more pressing, as they sought to assign meaning and purpose to their experiences in the trenches. Returning to a semblance of normalcy after witnessing such horrors was nearly impossible. Reintegration into society proved to be a significant challenge, as they struggled to conform to societal expectations and norms. The culturally prescribed and state-sanctioned post-war reintegration process further exacerbated their difficulties rather than facilitating recovery. Instead of providing a platform for these individuals to articulate their wartime experiences, it effectively silenced them, deepening their alienation from mainstream society. Many soldiers like Septimus had entered the war driven by ideals of nationalism—often bordering on jingoism—yet returned as fundamentally changed individuals with transformed perspectives. Septimus' understanding of human nature is profoundly altered by his experience of war. He embraces ideals of universal peace and love, completely rejecting both the concept of war and the rhetoric that sustains it. Recognizing the inherent dangers and absurdity of such rhetoric, he also denounces jingoism, refusing to partake in the glorification of militarism. However, such a shift in ideology did not align with the interests of the state, which capitalized on their sacrifices. It did not serve the agenda of those in power—figures who perpetuated and promoted war as a means of consolidating control. Consequently, every effort was made to suppress the voices of soldiers like Septimus and relegate them to the margins of society. Septimus' isolation and misunderstood suffering serve as a testament to the horrors of war, realities witnessed by millions of young men but conveniently ignored by their own leaders and fellow countrymen. While the nation focuses on erecting monuments to honor the fallen and idolize their sacrifices, the survivors are largely forgotten, if not outright rejected. This neglect intensifies the profound guilt experienced by many veterans, including Septimus, compounding their psychological distress and further alienating them from the society they once fought to protect.

Septimus' trauma emerges four years after the war has ended, aligning with the third of the "three clearly discernible life patterns for war neurotic ex-servicemen" outlined by Peter Leese in *Traumatic Neurosis: Shell Shock and the British Soldiers of the First World War*. Leese describes three categories of war neurotics: 1. Those affected by the war but able to recover relatively quickly, at the latest by the early 1920s. 2. Veterans who struggled to shed their symptoms or reintegrate into civilian life, either never recovering from the war or suffering a severe relapse years later. 3. Men who left the military seemingly healthy but whose mental condition later deteriorated. Septimus fits into the third category. He is plagued by guilt over witnessing the death of his commanding officer, Evans. Immediately after the war and even in the immediate aftermath of Evans' death, he felt nothing, maintaining an attitude of indifference. However, four years after the war's conclusion, intense guilt and self-accusation surface. He begins to experience hallucinations and vivid flashbacks of his wartime experiences. Jude Todd discusses how combat trauma is a deeply visceral experience that profoundly affects the mind, emotions, and body. Septimus exhibits classic symptoms of shell shock, later understood as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including guilt, emotional numbness, and fragmented speech. However, the psychological effects of trauma were neither widely understood nor accepted at the time. As a result, he is misunderstood, silenced, and marginalized. Additionally, he suffers from a delayed stress response, displaying signs of psychological distress four years after the war and nine months before the events of the novel begin. This challenges prevailing notions of shell shock, as veterans who exhibited symptoms more than six months after their service ended were often dismissed, with their trauma attributed to early childhood experiences rather than combat. Seeking treatment, Septimus first consults Dr. Holmes, whose approach proves ineffective, prompting him to seek help from Sir William Bradshaw. However, neither doctor is able or willing to administer the appropriate treatment.

Foucault's concept of power is particularly relevant in this context. Power does not function solely from a centralized source, nor is it localized; rather, it exerts influence and control through its capillaries, operating at multiple levels of society. As John Hargreaves explains, "Power in societies like ours is diffused and circulates throughout the social body. It is precisely this 'capillary' quality that has enabled power to be expanded so effectively in the modern age, to be applied routinely at appropriate points in the social order, and to be reorganized, refurbished, and elaborated periodically." In his essay, "Truth and Power", Foucault argues that power should no longer be understood as a force exercised from above, grounded in universal right. Instead, attention should be directed to the ways in which power operates beyond traditional juridical structures—where it becomes "capillary." These capillaries manifest through social, political, and economic institutions, shaping and reinforcing systems of control. This dynamic is evident in the treatment of Septimus, where institutional forces like the medical system, work to regulate and suppress his experiences, further illustrating Foucault's theory. For trauma recovery to begin, the past must be confronted and verbalized in order to restore a sense of continuity. Most trauma survivors remain psychologically trapped in the moment of their traumatic experience, unable to move forward. As a result, their perception of time becomes distorted; rather than experiencing life as a continuous progression, they become stuck in the past,

unable to distinguish between the time before the trauma and the time after it. Effective healing requires guiding survivors to understand that while the traumatic event is a significant moment in their lives, it does not have to define their identity entirely. Communication is essential for the recovery of trauma survivors, as it allows them to assign meaning to their experiences. Through articulation, their suffering becomes intelligible, facilitating both personal healing and broader societal understanding. By bearing witness to his experiences and suffering, Septimus could edify others not only about war but also about human nature and the social and political institutions that emerge from and reflect that nature. But he was not allowed to do so.

Septimus' psychological breakdown is marked by a profound contradiction in his perception of the world. He struggles to exhibit what his doctors consider "natural feelings," yet he is deeply moved by abstract and seemingly insignificant details, such as the shapes of words formed by smoke in the sky. "... inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness, one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely with beauty, more beauty!" (*Mrs Dalloway*, 18). At the same time, he experiences an acute and almost painful sense of connection to the natural world. He perceives the leaves as being alive, intricately linked to his own body: "But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body..." Similarly, he believes the sparrows are singing to him in Greek, conveying the message that "there is no crime" (*Mrs Dalloway*, 20). Rachel Zlatkin argues that *Mrs. Dalloway* does not present the veteran's experience and the natural environment as separate or opposing forces. Instead, she contends that "the two are inextricably bound in the character of Septimus Smith," illustrating the way in which his trauma blurs the boundaries between human suffering and the external world. Before the war, Septimus was perceived as delicate, with a love for poetry and little interest in sport, traits that his employer found concerning. However, war imposed upon him an outward masculinity; he appeared to thrive as a soldier. Yet beneath this façade, the trauma festered, ultimately shattering his psyche.

Roger Poole asserts that *Mrs. Dalloway* functions as a full-scale modernist critique of the official narrative of World War I, with Septimus' palpable anguish serving as its most powerful instrument. Poole argues that Septimus "harbors a truth no one will hear and defies in body and mind English war and post-war rhetoric in all of its 'heroic visions and masculinist fantasies.'" Septimus' vocabulary following his breakdown is heavily influenced by themes of crime and confession, which critics have interpreted in two distinct ways. First, his relationship with his commanding officer, Evans, is often viewed as emblematic of the deep bonds forged between men in wartime. Some readings of the text suggest that this bond carries undertones of homosexuality, an implication that directly challenges the rigidly enforced sexual norms of early twentieth-century society. Furthermore, certain scholars argue that a significant part of Septimus' psychological trauma stems from the oppressive force of heteronormative social codes. His suffering, in this interpretation, is not merely a result of his wartime experiences but is also exacerbated by a cultural framework that invalidates and marginalizes his unspoken desires, intensifying his alienation and emotional distress. Septimus' emotional numbness ultimately renders him incapable of articulating his grief. His silenced emotions and suppressed voice are directly linked to his society's prohibition against homosexuality. Wyatt Bonikowski traces Septimus' post-war guilt and trauma to pre-war experiences, specifically his heterosexual rather than homosexual impulses. Karen De Meester offers yet another perspective, asserting that the crime Septimus believes himself guilty of is not one of sexual deviance but rather one of indifference. She explains that "the crime Septimus refers to is the killing and, particularly, killing with indifference that he saw and more than likely participated in." Indifference was a necessary survival tactic for soldiers during the war, allowing them to endure its horrors without being consumed by them. However, for Septimus, this emotional detachment persists long after the war, leaving him unable to feel emotions in a socially acceptable way. His numbness leads him to marry Rezia out of panic, an attempt to regain a sense of normalcy.

Septimus also faces judgement from his doctor, Sir William Bradshaw, who questions him about his sexual impotence. This interrogation reflects wartime propaganda tactics that shamed non-enlisters by equating their refusal to fight with sexual inadequacy and a failure of manhood. In reality, however, sexual dysfunction was a well-documented symptom of shell shock. In every aspect of his experience, his potential homosexual inclinations, his rejection of war rhetoric, and his emotional numbness, Septimus challenges societal norms. Ironically, his perceived deficiency may not be that he feels too little, but rather that he feels too much. Elaine Showalter underscores this point, stating that "Septimus' problem is that he feels too much as a man." Similarly, McPherson concurs, arguing that "in the novel, it is feeling too much that transgresses acceptable and normal behavior." Septimus' very experience of trauma becomes an act of defiance in a society that glorifies masculinity and enforces rigid heteronormative codes. Through his character, Woolf critiques a society that forces its young men into rigid ideals of masculinity, only to abandon them when they fail to conform in the aftermath of war. Woolf also critiques a culture that is deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideals that not only marginalize trauma survivors but also actively hinder their recovery. In exposing a society that refuses to heal its wounded, Woolf highlights the devastating consequences of institutionalized indifference and repression. Septimus did develop a form of "manliness" during the war, but along with it, he also developed an overwhelming sense of indifference. Soldiers were expected to suppress their emotions, as feeling too much would prevent them from reintegrating into a post-war society that honored its fallen heroes while neglecting its survivors. This societal expectation, according to Karen Levenback plays a critical role in Septimus' breakdown and eventual suicide.

Even without external obstacles, trauma survivors often find it difficult to verbalize their suffering. This challenge is further exacerbated by those who should assist them- figures such as Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, who instead dismiss or outright ignore the psychological toll of war. Christine Froula critiques doctors like Holmes, who belittle their patients' suffering and insist upon immediate recovery rather than recognizing the complexity of trauma. McFarlane and Van der Kolk similarly highlight how many PTSD victims experience an impaired ability to translate their overwhelming emotions and sensory experiences into language. They argue that this struggle is further exacerbated by a lack of validation and social support, which prolongs the damaging effects of traumatic memories. Peter Leese reinforces this perspective, noting that Woolf's portrayal of shell shock engages directly with contemporary debates of the early 1920s. He further points out that Bradshaw's treatment of Septimus is a composite of Woolf's own encounters with Dr. George Savage and Sir Maurice Craig, both of whom played significant roles in the treatment of war-related neurosis during and after World War I.

Woolf demonstrates a profound sensitivity in her portrayal of war and, in particular, of shell-shocked victims through the character of Septimus. Although she had no firsthand experience in combat, she deeply understood the suffering, trauma, and alienation experienced by war survivors. War is a recurring concern in her works, reflecting a personal and intellectual engagement with its psychological and social consequences. Bazin and Lauter argue that Woolf should be regarded as a war novelist, attributing the roots of her sensitivity to war to the early deaths of beloved family members. Drawing on Louise DeSalvo's research, they further link this sensitivity to the violence and suffering she experienced as a victim of sexual abuse by her half-brothers and as a woman growing up in a patriarchal household marked by male dominance and egotism. Despite her political engagement, Woolf has often been characterized in Britain as "an exquisite stylist" whose literary concerns remained detached from traditional political discourse. Even her husband, Leonard Woolf, echoed this view (as noted in Mark Hussey's introduction to *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*). However, Roger Poole, in *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* refutes this perception, arguing that Woolf's depiction of Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway* is undeniable proof of her direct engagement with the political realities of her time. Sue Thomas further situates *Mrs. Dalloway* within the historical and political context of postwar Britain, demonstrating how the novel engages with the 1922 Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into Shell Shock. This engagement underscores Woolf's acute political awareness and her critique of postwar British society. Having endured personal losses from an early age, Woolf identified on an intimate level with the grief experienced by the families and friends of those who perished in war. Woolf's intellectual heritage also played a significant role in shaping her views on war and trauma. Her father, Leslie Stephen, was a committed pacifist who despised war and militarism, to the extent that he forbade his sons from pursuing military careers. This deep-seated aversion to war found its way into Woolf's work, particularly in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where she critiques the glorification of war and its devastating impact on the human psyche.

Septimus' response to Evans' death closely parallels Woolf's reaction to her mother's passing. Both experienced a delayed emotional response, marked by initial numbness followed by overwhelming grief and psychological distress. This parallel underscore the lasting scars of both personal and societal tragedies—wounds that Woolf and her character, Septimus, continued to battle long after the traumatic events had occurred. Woolf exhibits overt sympathy for Septimus, as his suffering mirrors her own struggles with mental illness and the burden of unexpressed trauma. He embodies what Thomas De Quincey termed "the burden of the incommunicable"—the profound isolation of those who see and understand truths that society refuses to acknowledge. Septimus perceives the true horror of war, stripped of patriotic rhetoric, as a senseless machine that consumes human lives. He seeks to convey this reality to the world, but society silences him, unwilling to confront the uncomfortable truth. His inability to communicate his trauma and, thereby, to give meaning and purpose to his suffering ultimately leads to his tragic demise. His fate exemplifies Foucault's discourse of power, as he is marginalized for challenging dominant narratives. The world, invested in maintaining its illusions of honor and heroism, rejects his truth, leaving him isolated in his suffering. Septimus' desperate attempt to articulate his revelations is evident in his fragmented thoughts:

"The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; first, that trees are alive; next, there is no crime; next, love, universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, an immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them forever." (*Mrs Dalloway*, 55)

He believes he holds the world's most vital message-one of life, love, and innocence, yet he is simultaneously consumed by guilt, convinced of an unnamed crime. This contradiction underscores the psychological damage inflicted by war. Robert Jay Lifton describes a concept he calls the "process of formulation," in which survivors attempt to construct a bridge that reconnects them with the post-war world. This idea resonates with Woolf's portrayal of Septimus whose struggle to reintegrate into society after the war ultimately fails due to his inability to communicate his trauma. Woolf's perspective on war was shaped not only by her pacifist upbringing but also by her personal experiences observing trauma survivors. Although she had no firsthand experience of combat and limited direct contact with soldiers, her thoughts on war were profoundly influenced by the struggles of her brother-in-law, Philip Woolf's recovery after he was injured in battle. Visiting him at a recovery facility, she made keen observations of the soldiers there, noting their absentmindedness, detachment, and symptoms of survival guilt-many of the same symptoms that she would

later depict in Septimus. These experiences reinforced Woolf's critique of a society that fails to acknowledge or support those suffering from war trauma. Instead of facilitating their process of formulation-the necessary bridge between past trauma and present reality-society isolates, silences, and ultimately abandons them. Septimus, unable to find this bridge, succumbs to his psychological wounds, illustrating Woolf's indictment of a culture that glorifies war while neglecting its survivors.

The war taught Septimus that human relationships were meaningless, and the language he wished to speak-the language of trauma, grief, and truth, was neither acknowledged nor endorsed by society. Only the dead could truly understand him: *"Evans was speaking. The dead were with him."* (*Mrs Dalloway*, 76). Any attempt to communicate his war experiences to the living was met with ignorance and scepticism, forcing him to turn inward. Instead of being able to relate to others, he scribbles down notes, trapped in a world where only his deceased comrade, Evans, remains a source of connection. Septimus' isolation mirrors the broader treatment of war veterans, both physically wounded and psychologically scarred. Those with visible wounds were set apart, while those with invisible psychological wounds, like Septimus, were overlooked. Society, as Woolf portrays it, wanted to forget the war and erase its painful reminders. Septimus, not bearing visible scars, was easy to dismiss. *"As long as Septimus was silent, he got along fine in the post-war world... It is only as Septimus reminds civilians of death that he is seen as threatening."(*Levenback*, 80)* His presence disrupts the state's efforts to move on and serves as an unwelcome reminder of war's horrors. Septimus longed to restore the importance of human connection, which had been lost in the aftermath of war. He even wanted Rezia to take part in this restored relationship, proposing a double suicide as an act of ultimate unity. It is only then that Rezia perceives him as mad. Until that moment, she had not fully understood the depth of his suffering, only vaguely wondering what was wrong with him. *"It is when Septimus recognizes the necessity of death in the absence of possibility in life that he kills himself."(*Levenback*, 80).* His suicide thus becomes an act of defiance against a world that refuses to acknowledge his pain.

"Septimus' shell-shocked breakdown, though instigated by his war experience, is equally a product of post-war British society's refusal to acknowledge psychological trauma "(Joyes,*72).* His suffering is compounded by a culture that dismisses his condition and enforces rigid, repressive approaches to healing. Rather than receiving understanding and support, Septimus is subjected to the aggressive and domineering treatment of figures like Dr. Holmes, whose insensitivity ultimately drives him toward his tragic end. Septimus exists in a state of temporal dislocation—trapped in the war, unable to move forward. His hallucinations, suicidal impulses, and detachment from reality illustrate how the passage of time does not simply erase trauma. Instead of being offered the means to process his suffering, he is met with medical authority figures who seek to silence him, reinforcing the isolation that war first imposed upon him. The very society that once demanded emotional detachment from its soldiers now punishes them for their inability to reintegrate. Holmes, in particular, embodies the brutal indifference of post-war British culture. His insistence on forced recovery and his dismissal of Septimus' pain as mere "nervous strain" reflect the larger societal failure to validate trauma. His aggressive approach to healing, rooted in dominance rather than care, ultimately accelerates Septimus' decline. The irony is stark: the very system designed to rehabilitate him becomes the force that drives him to his death.

The ignorance and hostility toward returning soldiers remain one of the central themes of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Woolf, through Septimus, exposes a post-war society that glorifies its fallen heroes but fails to care for its living ones. Karen DeMeester observes that "Virginia Woolf's characterization of Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates not only the psychological injuries suffered by victims of severe trauma such as war but also the need for them to give meaning to their suffering in order to recover from the trauma." However, society systematically denies them the opportunity to articulate their experiences, compounding their struggle to translate trauma into communicable language. Septimus' suffering is compounded in two ways: first, by the very culture that created war, and second, by that same culture's failure in its post-war treatment of veterans. Denied the opportunity to articulate his trauma, he is effectively silenced to death.

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