

## Original Paper

# An Analysis of Men and Women's Existential Plight from a Feminist Perspective: Taking *Mrs. Dalloway* as an Example

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### Abstract

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is the pinnacle of stream-of-consciousness fiction. Scholars have mostly focused their studies on aspects such as the novel's stream-of-consciousness techniques and the theme of death. From a feminist perspective, this paper analyzes oppression and its reason caused by the patriarchal society through the physical and spiritual survival plight of men and women in the novel, as well as the resistance and self-redemption of the two main characters when facing existential plight. It shows that Woolf cares for both women and men, and ultimately focuses on the eternal proposition of "man" with a humanistic mindset.

### Key words

Feminism, self-consciousness, mental crisis, gender harmony

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction of Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf was an English author, a representative of stream-of-consciousness literature, and is regarded as a pioneer of feminism. She was talented and joined the Bloomsbury group. The experience of being sexually abused by her two brothers in her youth greatly affected her mental health and planted fear and revulsion of sex in her subconscious, yearning for same-sex emotions. After being suffered from chronic mental illness, she eventually jumped into the river to commit suicide.

### 1.2 The Context of the Novel

*Mrs. Dalloway* is one of Woolf's most famous and popular stream-of-consciousness novels, and one of the best works of British modernist literature in 20th century. It mainly depicts the various people, Mrs. Dalloway, an upper-class housewife, and Septimus, a psychiatric patient, have experienced in one day

and tells the story of their life experiences through their mental activities. After suffering a mental crisis, Mrs. Dalloway suddenly comprehends the meaning of life and death through the death of Septimus, then she finds her true self.

## 2. Feminist Theory

### 2.1 The Definition of Feminist Theory

Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on sexual politics, power relations, and sexuality.

### 2.2 The Development of Feminist Theory

There are many schools of feminism, in the final analysis, hold one common viewpoint that women are an oppressed and discriminated group throughout the world, and that inequality between men and women should be eliminated throughout humanity. Engels put forward that the emancipation of women is the measure of human emancipation and regarded the emancipation of women as a requirement for the development of social justice. Western feminist theory has undergone many developments, and has spawned many schools such as liberal feminism, existential feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, and socialist feminism.

### 2.3 Virginia Woolf's Feminist Thoughts

As a pioneer of feminism, Woolf participated in several feminist movements, publishing many feminists literature, and was regarded as the “mother of feminist literary theory. However, Woolf was reluctant to call herself a feminist because she did not share the feminist view at that time that the replacement of masculinity by feminism is necessary to establish women's status. Instead, she believed that both men and women are victims and should help each other so that both sexes could escape the persecution of patriarchy. Men should not be the oppressors, nor the objectors of women.

Woolf's sympathy for men's being oppression of patriarchy can be noticed in her works *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. She creatively proposed the idea of “androgyny” (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*) and the psychologist Jung also pointed out that it is necessary to allow both femininity and masculinity to manifest themselves in the consciousness and behavior of the individual for a harmonious and balanced personality. Woolf's idea of “androgyny” largely deconstructs the contradiction of dichotomy, and her feminist ideas are so profound and creative.

## 3. Exist Plight of Women

### 3.1 Physical Plight: Angels in the House

The strong oppression of patriarchy confines women to the house, and women are expected to be “the angel in the house” (Patmore, 1854). In patriarchal society, marriage is the ultimate destiny of women, childbearing is the only mission of women, and the family is the garden of Eden for women. In the poem *The Angel in the House* Coventry Patmore uses all the beautiful words possible to praise his wife's virtues such as obedience, grace, devotion, and tenderness. Woolf used the term “the angel in the

house” as a metaphor for women who were selfless and devoted. In *A Room of One's Own*, she says, “The angels in the house are often willing to compromise and even sacrifice everything for the sake of women’s husbands and families, and they are the people with no self.”

Mrs. Dalloway in the novel is a typical representative of the upper-class housewife under the patriarchy. She puts her family and husband at the center of her life and believes that she should give something back in her daily life, especially her husband Richard, who is the foundation of it all. Politically, they don’t have the right to vote or make a voice. Mrs. Bruton, as a female representative who participates in politics, has to rely on men to help her write letters and express her political opinions. Financially, they must marry a rich man because they have difficulty finding a job. Sally Seaton eventually married a man, even though she was rebellious and independent and doesn’t like other traditional women, unable to escape the fate of female subordination to men, Clarissa thought the last person in the world that people would expect to marry a rich man and live in a large public house near Manchester is the reckless, daring, romantic Sally. In terms of education, Mrs. Dalloway relied on Miss Daniels to acquire little knowledge, for they are not allowed to get education. The only way for women who in disadvantaged positions to survive is to attach to men, being confined to the home and deprived of the economic conditions to live independently, otherwise they would be isolated, marginalized or even expelled just like Miss Kilman.

### 3.2 Emotional Plight: Desire of Love

The emotional dilemma faced by Clarissa Dalloway is manifested firstly in her relationship with her husband Richard and ex-boyfriend Peter. She had no freedom with Peter; while Richard had given her freedom but abandoned her. In *The Second Sex*, french feminist thinker Simone Beauvoir points out that “She is the subordinate person, the secondary. He is the subject, the absolute, and she is the Other”. The woman is the “Other” (Beauvoir, 2010, p. 9) who is dependent and subordinate to the man. In the presence of a man, gender defines Clarissa’s status as an “Other”. Peter can give Clarissa romantic love, but he has a strong desire to control and be jealous, which leads Clarissa to a humble “Other” in control. Richard allows Clarissa to have freedom, but their love story was not smooth. Richard couldn’t say love to Clarissa, and Clarissa felt lonely while Richard is having dinner with Mrs. Bruton, “He has left me, and I shall be alone forever” (Woolf, 1925). And Richard is the basis of everything in her life, She is not even Clarissa, but Mrs. Dalloway. Clarissa is dependent on Richard as the “Other”. In the love relationship with the two men, Clarissa is in a passive, objectified and gradually marginalized position of the disembodied “Other”, both in terms of authority and emotion.

After her reunion with Peter, Clarissa expected Peter to take her away secretly. However, she soon resists the urge and returns to her identity as Mrs. Dalloway, which accords with Peter’s words, Clarissa is always cowardly, even as a girl, and in middle age cowardice turns into conformity.

Whereas in the relationship with Sally, Clarissa felt joyful and fulfilled physically and mentally. That Clarissa is willing to take their feelings as love, she asked herself twice for the relationship between Sally and her, “Isn’t this love?” She adored Sally Seaton’s beauty, felt great pleasure when Sally kissed

her on the lip, and envied Sally's free soul, a kind of free will which says and does whatever she wants. Clarissa's husband Richard blames her for the imperfections of her soul, Peter always criticizes her, while Sally believes Clarissa is an extraordinary genius and she begs Peter to take Clarissa away to protect her from Hugh and other perfect gentlemen who would suffocate her soul, turn her into a mere mistress, and encourage her worldly desires. Sally loves Clarissa, understands her, and wishes Clarissa to live her own life. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that traditional heterosexual marriage is the destination for women in people's cognition and the practice of women being forced to converge to socially accepted sanity and norms. Therefore, the love between Clarissa and Sally definitely ends in tragedy.

### 3.3 Psychological Plight: Self Alienation

Clarissa's exist plight is not only the material dependency, but also spiritual crisis and emptiness. "She suddenly finds the core of life a void, like an empty little attic. According to the logic of the patriarchal society, the difference in temperament and natural attributes determines the different social roles to be undertaken. As a result, women are only suited to be "angels in the house" in the family, while men are active in other areas, which was questioned and opposed by numerous feminists. Simone Beauvoir criticizes this with existentialism theory in *The Second Sex*, the so-called femininity is culturally derived and learned, rather than instinctive or natural. Kate Miller further reveals the operation strategy of patriarchy, "Instilling and entrenching female inferiority through a series of morphological, economic, psychological, educational, and other domains until women internalize it, women believe that this gender order is not only universal but immutable." As Mrs. Bruton says in the novel, she often feels her own impotence as a woman and respects a mysterious consensus: it is men, not women, who masters the laws of the universe.

Clarissa is a rebel under the surface of docility. She dislikes Peter's control, used to be a political radical, worships Lady Bexbora who stands out in the field of male domination, adores Sally's free will, and is jealous of Kilman's spontaneity. But most of the time, Mrs. Dalloway constrains her ego, follows the social roles of women as defined by patriarchal society, and tries her best to be a perfect hostess as her husband asks. As the "Other", women have no independent economic condition but to be dependent on men. The subordination further weakens the independent spirit of women as individuals and makes women the "appendages" without self-consciousness and thinking skill. Although she is more gifted than Richard, she has to understand society through Richard. Though with independent mind, she had to quote Richard. Her spirits are died is timid and formal now while she was lively and enthusiastic in the past, and it is the responsibilities imposed on her by the real world forced her to give in because Richard asks her to be a perfect hostess. In the real world, women are often associated with domesticity, softness and sensuality, which is "femininity" (Connell, 2008). While consolidating the male-centered gender culture, gender temperament puts women on the edge of the weak labor division of gender culture. The gender temperament of masculinity and femininity corresponds to the roles as outer-man and inner-women, turning women into "the angel in the house" like Mrs. Dalloway, and this is the

purpose of inventing gender temperament, to make women serve and submit to men. This influence is subtle but even more horrifying because it alienates women's sense of self. The image of women is demonized, discourse is denied, and the idea of being oppressed in women's mind is diluted, whereas women are numb, and they take it for granted. Because as soon as the slogan appears, the thinking stops.

#### **4. Exist Plight of Men**

##### *4.1 The Reason of War*

Patriarchy is not only oppressing women, but also backfiring and oppressing men themselves. Sexual distinction, both sex and gender, is in a binary opposition system. In this binary gender system, the temperament of gender acts on the subject in the form of specific rules and regulations. Women are labeled as "sensual," "gentle," and "delicate," while men are also defined as "rational," "strong," and "masculine". The existence of gender temperament sets an invisible framework that gives men and women a more specific reference from their appearances to their behaviors, and within the effect of this reference, people keep changing their original state to meet the requirements of gender temperament under patriarchal authority. It took many struggles and revolutions for women in history to gain the right to wear trousers and jeans in the last century, while men who are wearing women's clothing today are still called "transvestites". The achievements of many anonymous female scientists throughout history were deliberately concealed or attributed to men, "Matilda Effect" (Rossiter, 1993), which circumvented feminine masculinity in order to consolidate male dominance in the workplace, while the patriarchy also required that men not be associated with femininity, and to this day we refer to those men who are not "masculine" enough as "sissies" or "girly men". The novel's character, Peter Walsh, is romantic and passionate, whose female-like quality is the opposite of the rationality required by masculinity, and he hates the rigid social system as well has been abandoned by the upper class that demands masculinity. Peter has a paper knife that he carries around for thirty years and plays with it when he needs to show his masculinity and seek self-confidence in front of women. The knife, a symbol of masculinity, is his self-defense weapon, which reflects Peter's irresistible potential compliance with masculinity in a patriarchal society.

Speaking of masculinity, in *War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, Leo Braudy argues that war is the best arena to prove masculinity. War measures masculinity in terms of heroic sacrifice and survival, bravery and cowardice, thus the defense of the homeland seems to be the most painful and dangerous manifestation.

##### *4.2 The Trauma after War*

Many men suffered mental breakdowns after the two world wars, and Britain became known as "Mad Britain". Septimus, the another main character in the novel, suffers from shell shock which is called PTSD now. He is anxious, fearful, weak and paralyzed, which are the opposite of the bravery, strength and calmness needed for normal person, and completely contrary to the image of a hero and a man. His

doctor Holmes said, “A man threatening suicide is a sign of weakness”, and even his wife Lycia, after seeing Septimus in tears, screaming that for her the most terrible thing of all is to see a man like Septimus who had fought in the war, who had behaved so bravely weeping and crying. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter analyzed that the “shell shock” is very much related to the masculinity that society expects from men, which forces them to be strong and reckless, and that war also disrupts the existing social order and reverses the former values. People’s sense of morality deteriorated, while loneliness and alienation have been increased, their humanity was severely suppressed and distorted, and they were on the verge of total derangement.

While creating *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf indicated in her diary, “In this book I will describe life and death, sanity and madness; I will criticize the social system and reveal its dynamics, most essential ones at that.” When Peter encounters a group of lads on the march, he saw them marching steadily, “As if a unified voice had been directing their legs and arms to move in unison, while colorful, unwillingly silent beings were put under streets full of monuments and anesthetized by discipline into a stiff but still staring corpse.” It seems that this sound like the “equilibrium” of which the psychiatrist Sir Bradshaw spoke. Equilibrium is like congruence of which the physical gender must be aligned with the social gender, and if someone behaves differently and disrupts the equilibrium, they are marked as deviant and excluded from mainstream society. He also said “Equilibrium has a sister who is even more frightening. Her name is converted, she defeats the will of the weak and imposes on others. She hides under certain disguise, such as love, duty, and self-sacrifice.” Bradshaw’s method of treatment is to isolate the patients, forbidding them to proclaim their opinions even declaring despair, and to give them the “equilibrium” that society demands by repressing their egos through “convert”.

Beauvoir wrote on the first page of *The Second Sex* that “Women are not born but are formed later in life”. We are born as biological sex, but in the process of growing up, we become social gender, which is a code of behavior for different genders constructed according to gender differences. Our gender culture is not innate and natural, but social and constructed. Professor Judith Butler of Harvard University calls this process of becoming gender as gender performativity, and she claims that the self or ego is in a constant state of change, and it is always being defined and reconstructed by power culture and tradition. This is also similar to Beauvoir’s view that women are not born as a woman but become a woman in the process of constantly repeating the role of a woman. The principle of this role is, as Sir Bradshaw calls it, “equilibrium”, the most severe constraint on women in patriarchal societies, which at the same time also oppresses and is turned to men themselves.

## 5. The Fight and Self Salvation

### 5.1 Septimus Smith: Being towards Death

Septimus, as the doppelganger of Mrs. Dalloway, is another spiritual ego of Clarissa. They love life, but they are both victims of patriarchy, deviating from the established roles of society. They are both struggling on the verge of mental breakdown, both plagued by loneliness and fear, both have lost the

integrity of life and the independence of their souls, both have the sense of “death instinct” (Freud, 1920). The two of them were reminded of the eulogy to Imogene in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, “If I die now, now is the happiest of all”. Woolf wrote in her diary that “Septimus’s madness is a public manifestation of the fierce battle going on in Clarissa’s mind”. Faced with reality, they made different choices. Mrs. Dalloway chose to succumb to reality, but she was spiritually dead, for She felt invisible, unseen and unknowable. Septimus chose to die physically, but the spirit was finally freed. This state of madness is not so much spiritual freedom achieved by the protagonist, but rather a defeat of his resistance, because it is too solemn and stirring to use madness and death as the victory of resistance.

### 5.2 *Clarissa Dalloway: Returning to Self*

Mrs. Dalloway had come to a transcendental conclusion that “The invisible part of us remains after death and will somehow attach itself to this or that person”. The news of Septimus’ death reverberated strongly in Mrs. Dalloway’s heart, making Clarissa re-examine her life and realize her spiritual death. That the meaning of life, lies in spiritual enrichment and independence, which is the “existential moments” (Woolf, *Moments of Being*). The death of Septimus also brings Clarissa the hope of rebirth, allowing her to see the fullness of life in the past, the emptiness of life in the present and the prosperity of new life. The sound of the bell implies Clarissa her everlasting life, and the “cycle of the bell” (Woolf, 1925) suggests that Septimus’ soul and will are reborn in Clarissa. With her whole self, Clarissa returns to the banquet. The different names given to her at the beginning and at the end of the novel reveal Clarissa’s self-redemption and self-return, “Mrs. Dalloway said she had gone out to buy flowers by herself”, “That’s Clarissa, she was back”. She is no longer the objectified and marginalized Mrs. Dalloway, but Clarissa with full self and free will.

### 5.3 *Building Gender Harmony*

Woolf proposed “androgyny,” and in psychology, androgyny is generally considered as the perfect personality. Jung called it allowing for the feminine aspect of the male personality and the feminine aspect of the female personality. Gender harmony advocates the right of men and women to develop harmoniously and equally as human beings, and to achieve the free development of the human being. Its purpose is to break the established gender hierarchy and single gender roles of both sexes. As Woolf said, “Life is not an arrangement, but a pursuit” (Woolf, *Waves*).

## 6. Conclusion

Woolf’s feminist ideas remain one of the guiding philosophies of the international women’s liberation movement today. Feminism advocates equality rather than power, aiming to allow men and women to retain their individual differences so that gender is no longer a factor that is considered first in everything, rather some other essential element of a person, enabling both men and women to be free from the shackles of gender and realize full potential. *Mrs. Dalloway* inspires people to examine and think about the ills of patriarchal society and to re-explore and reconstruct the definition of female identity, reflecting not only the bondage and shackles faced by women and men in a patriarchal society,

but also the desire for freedom and equality. Therefore, feminism is the liberation of women from oppression, and secondly, the deeper meaning is to drive the liberation of all human beings, including the liberation of men, which elevates to a high level with universal significance for all human beings, that is, to establish a harmonious survival status and social relations, and to realize the spiritual pursuit of human integrity. Life should be a choice of free will and complete self, not a dependence on another gender and individual.

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