Gender Roles In Mrs Dalloway

A main theme in Mrs. Dalloway is that you can't pretend to fully understand anyone and there's much more to a person below the surface. While many people see Clarissa as "the perfect hostess:" kind of fake and restrained and meaningless, she actually struggles with very real problems and has incredibly complex thoughts and emotions. To her, Clarissa's parties aren't just an excuse for rich people to dress up, enjoy fancy food, and act fake together. They're a way to bring people together and celebrate relationships and culture and life. I'm still not super into the whole housewife "hostess" image, but by depicting her in this manner I think Woolf is making the point that just because a woman such as Clarissa is uneducated and economically dependent on her husband does not mean she is of lower value than him. Even though her type of work may be different from Richard's, Clarissa is still doing important work that has meaning to her and makes her a more independent character.

Another clue that Virginia Woolf is criticizing gender stereotypes in Mrs. Dalloway is through Septimus and her portrayal of hyper-masculinity promoted during the world wars and the dangerous effects that can have. Septimus's time in the war resulted in his inability to feel upon returning home, to the extent that he was unable to grieve for the death of his closest friend, a fact that he is almost proud of. Not displaying emotion makes him more masculine, but because he becomes concerned about his lack of feeling, he is seen as weak and cowardly by the doctors who are used to previous generations of warfare that didn't involve nearly as many mentally scarred veterans. There is simply a societal expectation that men will be impossibly tough and unphased by battle and death, and this is what Woolf critiques by showing Septimus's struggle for understanding and peace, that ends up resulting in his death.

While I was originally unimpressed with the female characters in Mrs. Dalloway and the depiction of working women, I think Woolf does a good job of establishing that a person's worth is not defined by the money they make or the facts they know, but by the relationships they have with other people. This combined with Septimus's story and the reflection on masculine ideals and the danger they can create, made me appreciate Woolf's writing in regards to gender in Mrs. Dalloway.