Masculinity And Femininity In The Novel Mrs Dalloway

Virginia Woolf's novel, Mrs. Dalloway, can be classified as a genuine literary attempt to rewrite preconceived notions of both masculinity and femininity as it relates to the human condition.

Within her given context of the post-WWI modernist period, Woolf specifically emphasises the subjugation of women, supporting this with the constant appraisal of women from a male perspective, thus bringing into question the validity of social constructions that limit freedoms relating to one's identity.

Woolf argues that our internal consciousness is not inherently gendered, it is only through external cues obtained in human socialisation that we come to interpret specific ideological and personal qualities as gendered, and then adapt our behaviour and external persona according to these prescribed societal molds.

Primarily, Woolf aims to communicate this message through the characters of Clarissa and Septimus. In Clarissa's case, the experience of marriage, its monotony and the loss of identity it accompanies is a central critique. While considering aspects of her life and her place in society, Clarissa "Had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway." She has already fulfilled her purpose as a woman within her contextual society, now occupying her time with tasks that affirm her feelings of insignificance and leaves her unable to make meaningful contributions to society. She actively acknowledges her loss of identity when she refers to herself as Mrs. Richard Dalloway, combining this with the use of the past tense to emphasise a depletion of self. When Clarissa was a teenager, she and Sally Seton "spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe.", both of them agreeing that marriage would interfere with their individual sense of autonomy. When Clarissa later learns that Sally Seton is married and has five children, she believes that the constricting nature of marriage was unsuited for her, in light of the radical way she desired to shape the world. Moreover, Mrs. Dalloway brings attention to restrictive social expectations surrounding the concept of masculinity.

Septimus Warren Smith, a war-traumatised man and completely out of tune with high society, is presented by Woolf to be Clarissa's opposite by means of societal definitions of class, gender and personal experiences. However, through Woolf's unique narrative structure based on the human consciousness, she depicts an internal sameness through a shared androgyny among both identities living in Victorian England.

The categorisation of mental illness as a female malady also enabled the labelling of men with shell shock as inferior, due to their sudden inability to meet prescribed gendered roles within society. This is evident in the quote "Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now." Woolf directly identifies the experience of war as a symbol of masculinity, a driving force in creating the ideal man. Notably, Woolf highlights Septimus' contribution to society's fiction of conventional masculinity, which has led to a diminished sense of individuality in Septimus' case. This consequently aids Woolf's effectiveness in critiquing the damaging nature of social

expectations in its ability to hinder one’s ability to achieve self-actualisation. Using a metaphor to describe himself as merely “a piece of bone”, Septimus illustrates himself as a man that has already fallen victim to the inadequacy of society, instead expected to internalise his grief and trauma subsequent to the experience of war.