

## *Mrs. Dalloway*

Three years after the appearance of *Jacob's Room*, Woolf published *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the book that established her reputation as an important contemporary novelist. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, first published in book form three years earlier in Paris, *Mrs. Dalloway* appropriates the unities of time and place, presenting the thoughts and experiences of three main characters—Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Warren Smith—during the course of a single day in London in June of 1923. The action of *Ulysses*, which also takes place on a June day, but in Dublin in 1904, includes a burial, a birth, a visit to a brothel, and—the day's most significant event—the late-night meeting of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, the novel's protagonists. The day experienced by the main characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, has equal if not greater significance for them; after an absence of five years, Peter Walsh returns from his life as a colonial civil servant in India and renews his painful friendship with Clarissa, who had refused his proposal many years ago to marry Richard Dalloway instead. During the same day, Septimus Warren Smith, a mentally disturbed young war veteran under the care of the physician Sir William Bradshaw, takes his life by throwing himself from a window; Bradshaw reports the event to Clarissa's husband later that evening at the Dalloways' party, which Peter attends, bringing together the disparate experiences of the three main characters at the end of the novel.

Woolf's first three novels concern themselves with the development of young people who are on the threshold of adult life and face having to make critical choices as to how and with whom they shall live. *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, is essentially a novel about middle-aged characters taking stock of their lives. With the exception of Septimus Warren Smith, whose young life, like that of Jacob Flanders, is blighted and destroyed by the war,<sup>1</sup> the major characters in the novel—Clarissa Dalloway and Peter Walsh—are involved in reacting to the day's sights and events, recalling the past,

assessing their lives thus far, and considering the effects of their relationships upon their current existence. These characters and the novel's narrator also examine the lives of a number of other middle-aged characters—Richard Dalloway, a Member of Parliament and Clarissa's husband; Hugh Whitbread, a retainer of the Court; Sally Seton, an old friend of Clarissa and Peter; the physician Sir William Bradshaw and his wife, Lady Bradshaw; and Miss Kilman, tutor to Elizabeth Dalloway. In abandoning elements of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development, employed in her early novels, Woolf, along with other contemporaries such as Joyce and Proust, evolves a genre that might be termed the *Erfahrungsroman*, or novel of experience, in which adults assess their lives, the choices they have made, and the impact of events that have befallen them.

As in Woolf's earlier novels, most of the artists, musicians, poets, writers, and researchers in *Mrs. Dalloway* are amateurs. Of the practicing artist-figures and scholars in the novel, all appear only at the end of the novel at the Dalloways' party, where each is satirized. Clarissa's old friend Sir Harry is a professional painter of questionable distinction (266). Apparently an heir of the school of Constable, he specializes in paintings of "cattle standing absorbing moisture in sunset pools" (266). Also present at the party is "little Jim Hutton," whom Clarissa characterizes as a "very bad poet" and who appears in red socks (268). Earlier in the novel, Miss Kilman has mentally condemned Clarissa for being a daughter of "the rich, with a smattering of culture" (186). Indeed, the Dalloway household is very far from being a center of artistic activity and patronage in the traditional sense. Rather, Clarissa invites such figures as Sir Harry and Jim Hutton to her parties for their social value—Sir Harry is something of a *bon vivant* and Hutton plays the piano beautifully—knowing full well that their work as painter and poet is insignificant.<sup>2</sup> The presence at the party of Professor Brierly, the Milton scholar, whom Clarissa views as "a very queer fish" (267), provides another opportunity for Woolf to continue her satirical treatment of academics.

Among the minor female characters, a number practices a particular art or craft as an avocation, one that offers a creative outlet for the pressures and frustrations of their limited lives. Having lost her teaching position because of her German ancestry and her failure to condemn Germany during the war, the physically repellent Miss Kilman leads a marginal existence tutoring Elizabeth Dalloway in history, attending religious services and lectures, and, despite her tin ear, attempting to play the violin as a source of consolation (188). As an exuberant, comically defiant young woman, Clarissa's old friend Sally Seton seemed destined for a bohemian existence in the arts: "she would paint, she would write" (276). To both Clarissa's and Peter's surprise, however, Sally has married an owner of cotton mills in Manchester. In mid-life, Sally demonstrates pride in her five sons and her extensive beds of rare hibiscus. Her garden, however, also serves as a welcome retreat, where she finds a degree of "peace" that she fails to receive from others (293–4). Characterized by Clarissa as "the typical successful

man's wife," Lady Bradshaw has had to accommodate herself to her husband's formidable will: "Sweet was her smile, swift her submission" (152).<sup>3</sup> As a dutiful wife, Lady Bradshaw accompanies her physician husband on his rounds, patiently waiting in his elegant gray car, or taking professional-grade photographs of old churches nearby (143).

Among the remaining female characters, two of an even older generation have been more successful in channeling their creative energy into unusually productive activities. Clarissa's maiden aunt, old Miss Parry, was in her younger years the picture of energetic Victorian spinsterhood, having traveled widely (and dangerously) in Burma, collecting orchid specimens and documenting them in her watercolors. At Clarissa's party, she cannot resist telling Peter that her book on Burmese orchids was praised by none other than Charles Darwin himself and was issued in three editions before 1870 (272).<sup>4</sup> Likewise privileged by wealth and social standing, the elderly Lady Bruton, proud of her descent from military and civic leaders, "men of action, who had done their duty" (167) and possessed of a "pent egotism" that "must eject upon some object" (164–5), uses her social position aggressively to advance political and social causes, asking Richard Dalloway and Hugh Whitbread to lunch to help her draft a letter to the *Times* promoting emigration to Canada.

Lady Bradshaw, Sally Seton, Miss Parry, Lady Bruton and Clarissa all inhabit a world of privilege, nurtured by a highly organized patriarchal social system. The men in their lives in turn serve the empire and its needs, whether as physicians, Members of Parliament, court retainers, or captains of industry. As women, however, they constantly confront the limitations imposed upon them by their rigidly defined roles as wives, mothers, and daughters of their class. As in the cases of Sally Seton and Lady Bradshaw, creative activity becomes marginalized as a result of these restrictive roles, which largely determine their lives—roles particularly difficult for women whose temperaments do not naturally gravitate toward the social and the domestic.

Clarissa Dalloway, however, embraces her role, accepting the realities of her social position as an MP's wife and turning them to her advantage in practicing her art as a hostess and society matron. In fact, one could argue that Clarissa has actively sought this role in her deliberate choice of Dalloway over Peter Walsh as her spouse. As Peter observes to himself, Clarissa had always been socially ambitious: "she was worldly; cared too much for rank and society and getting on in the world" (115). But contrary to his and Sally Seton's shared opinion, it is not snobbery that has motivated her so much as wanting to be in a position to exercise her artistry as a hostess. This embracing of the actualities of her life reflects a willingness to compromise—to accept the personal limitations of her role in order to have access to a medium in which she may ply her art. As a social artist, Clarissa Dalloway operates at the center of Beebe's Sacred Fount, where life—human relations in all their diversity and complexity—assumes the form of art.<sup>5</sup>

If one compares Clarissa's experience with that of Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith, the two other main characters, one detects an increasing inability to make use of one's experiences to foster one's creativity. Clarissa thrives as a hostess—a social artist—as a result of her choice of a husband and a particular way of life. As one who was expected to become a writer and occasionally entertains the idea of researching topics of interest in the Bodleian in his retirement, Peter Walsh has not been able to master the events of his life and turn them to his fullest creative advantage. An aspiring poet from the working class, Septimus Warren Smith is overwhelmed by the events of his young life, which dissipate his creative focus and ultimately destroy him.

As will be seen, despite quite pronounced differences—in gender experience and in class origin—the three main characters share similarities of temperament. All at one time wrote or hoped to write; all demonstrate a refined sensibility and an unusual receptivity to beauty, especially as manifested in the physical world; all experience great pleasure simply in being alive. Each of the three is also a tenacious individualist, despite the common roles or activities in which he or she is or has been involved. Finally, each also exhibits a perspective that is critical of others and, in Peter's and Septimus's cases, of the prevailing order as well. As participants in, and observers of, their times, Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus, albeit to widely varying degrees, are also outsiders, maintaining a distanced stance from the life around them. In the case of Septimus, the alienation from social life bred by his combat experience degenerates into madness—perhaps the ultimate manifestation of one's apartness from others save for death itself, which he also reaches before the end of the novel.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Septimus and Peter, Clarissa's upper-class background has given her a distinct advantage in life. Recalling with pride that her eighteenth-century ancestors were courtiers (6), Clarissa frequently reverts to scenes from her girlhood at Bourton, her family's country estate. As a girl, Clarissa appears to have exhibited a literary bent; Sally Seton recalls how she produced "reams of poetry," and remembers begging Peter to rescue Clarissa from men like Dalloway and Whitbread "who would 'stifle her soul' . . . make a mere hostess of her, encourage her worldliness" (114). Under Sally's influence, Clarissa would read Plato, Shelley, and William Morris, and the two would sit for hours in Clarissa's bedroom, planning social activities with lofty, naïve reformist goals, such as establishing "a society to abolish private property" (49).

Although Clarissa's social ambition easily overrides such youthful idealism, she retains something of it in her party-making, which involves bringing disparate people together and "making a world of her own" (114):

Here was So-and-so in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair. And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create . . . (184–5)

Looking at her image in her bedroom mirror, Clarissa thinks of herself as one who provides a time and a place in which the bored and the isolated among her acquaintances can meet to experience moments of warmth and connection (55).

Ultimately, however, Clarissa comes to regard her party-making talent as simply “her gift,” believing she has no other skills, artistic or otherwise (185). One wonders, of course, how accurate this self-effacing assessment is, and how much her failure to nurture other, dormant talents may be the result of her social conditioning as a daughter of the upper class or her willful repression of them. Certainly she senses an artificial element in her role as a hostess; at such times, she is “something not herself” (259). As Peter recalls, however, Clarissa has always exhibited a strong “social instinct,” even as a girl, when she introduced him in a particularly mannered way to an acquaintance, and he chaffed her for being the “perfect hostess” (93). Despite Peter’s criticism of her fondness for socializing and her husband’s concern for her health—she has a weak heart—Clarissa in her maturity is compelled to continue giving parties because she feels it is what she does best.

To a large extent, Clarissa’s need to entertain also reflects her abundant zest for living. As Peter reminds himself, her capacity for enjoyment is seemingly boundless (118). Her trip to a florist’s, where she savors the colors and scents of fresh cut flowers, as well as her walk in her Westminster neighborhood remind her of her intense pleasure in the moment:

In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (5)

Because Clarissa harbors no illusions about a guaranteed afterlife, she ascribes great significance to the life that has been given her, a fact that occasionally evokes “terror” in her (281).

For this reason, the prospects of aging and death loom large in Clarissa’s mind, as they do in Peter’s.<sup>7</sup> Returning from her morning walk and discovering that she has not been invited to accompany her husband to luncheon at Lady Bruton’s, Clarissa suddenly feels “shrivelled, aged, breastless” (45). Inspecting her image in her mirror, she rallies quickly, however, reminding herself that she is still not “old,” having just turned fifty-one (54). As a defense against the finality of death, Clarissa harbors a pandemic notion of her identity, sensing herself to be “everywhere” (231). She entertains the possibility that after death,

. . . somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met;

being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (12)

Clarissa's main ways of celebrating life and alleviating the prospect of death are to live for others, to do kindnesses, and to bring people together. Recalling Clarissa's religious skepticism, Peter satirically characterizes her attitude toward life while also admiring her feisty defiance of fate:

As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship (her favourite reading as a girl was Huxley and Tyndall, and they were fond of these nautical metaphors), as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the sufferings of our fellow-prisoners (Huxley again); decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can. Those ruffians, the Gods, shan't have it all their own way . . . (117)

Despite her spirited resistance of the forces of chaos and death in her doing for others and bringing them together, there remains in Clarissa something solitary and impersonal that coexists with her social self and finds its objective correlative in her attic bedroom, where she retreats at the end of each day to read memoirs and sleep alone in a narrow bed. As an ambitious hostess, Clarissa is gratified to have her house full of guests (261), but here is "an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room" (45), where she can retreat, nun-like, to her innermost self, which prefers to forego intimacy with another and retains "a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet" (46).<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion of approaching death in the imagery of Clarissa's narrow bed, her candle "half burnt down" (46), and the winding sheet of her psychic virginity evokes a sense of physical stasis, a condition akin to Eliot's "still point of the turning world" ("Burnt Norton," 62) in which the soul is finally free of external realities and capable of listening to its own rhythms. For Clarissa's virginity of soul needs privacy and autonomy, as do the individuals in a marriage:

. . . there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect . . . for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one's husband, without losing one's independence, one's self-respect—something, after all, priceless. (181)

As Peter is fully aware, Clarissa's seeming coldness is not simply a matter of what he considers to be insufficient feminine warmth and sensuality in heterosexual relations, but a condition of her mind. One of the major reasons why Clarissa has chosen Richard over Peter as her spouse has to do with her determination to protect her spiritual independence, which Richard freely grants. With Peter, however, "everything had to be shared; everything gone into" (10). Clarissa's apparent deficiency of passion for Richard has protected her from the intensity of love, which, like institutionalized religion, she feels, destroys "the privacy of the soul" (192).<sup>9</sup>

This independence of mind is also a valuable trait of the artist, who, even as he or she culls material from the life surrounding him or her, must eventually be able to view it with a certain degree of objectivity, take its measure, and fashion it into art. As Clarissa's medium is human relations, she exhibits an uncanny ability to size up a situation swiftly and accurately: "She sliced like a knife through everything" (11). As a hostess, she has the invaluable ability to assess personalities instinctively (11). Although Clarissa tries to convince herself that she is no longer judgmental (11), she is, as Sally Seton rightly observes, "hard on people" (291), having decided not to invite her rather colorless cousin Ellie Henderson to her gathering (178). This criticalness, unappealing though it occasionally is, serves her well as she plans events that will bring others together successfully. Above all, Clarissa is favored with a willful vitality which Peter characterizes as having a degree of "toughness" he has not seen anywhere else (236).

Unlike Clarissa's, Peter Walsh's life has not proved nearly so successful or satisfying. As Sally Seton recalls at the Dalloways' party, his friends had expected him to become a writer (285). As a young intellectual with socialist views, Peter would visit Clarissa at Bourton, where they would debate issues as well as share their interest in poetry: "(she was a Radical then)" (234). Clarissa chose to marry Dalloway, however, and Peter was sent down from Oxford, eventually enlisting in the civil service in India.

Broad though Peter's interests have remained, his writing has been limited to letters, which Clarissa characterizes as "dry sticks" (9). He considers researching and writing about topics of personal interest in his retirement, but at the moment is in London trying to expedite the divorce of Daisy, the much younger woman he hopes to marry. Much to his humiliation, he knows that he will need to ask Richard Dalloway to help him find another government job soon. At lunch together, Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread, and Richard, fond as they are of Peter, share the same view of his life as a failure, remembering how he had been refused by Clarissa and "gone to India; come a cropper; made a mess of things" (161). Peter is keenly aware of their assessment; while examining both Clarissa's and his own life, he recalls the idealism of their youth and compares it to their present lives: "it was this; it was middle age; it was mediocrity" (236).<sup>10</sup> If Clarissa's life appears mediocre to Peter, she certainly does not view it as such, and jealousy of her comparative success appears to be motivating him at least partially in making such an assessment. Unlike Clarissa, Peter has been unable to make positive use of the materials of his life. His creativity has surfaced from time to time—he has invented a plough for use in the Indian district where he served, for example—but for the most part, his best energies have been subsumed in years of lackluster colonial service.

Peter's emotional life has been unsatisfying as well. If one can isolate a single cause for his unremarkable middle age, it would appear to be his unusual sensitivity, which he feels has handicapped him. Like Clarissa, he experiences

intense moments of heightened awareness. Observing an ambulance streaking by from his vantage point opposite the British Museum, he is overwhelmed by the thoughts of life and death it evokes (230). Peter is also highly receptive to beauty, as his appreciation for the effects of the “yellow-blue evening light” over London makes clear (246). The intense emotions that such experiences stir in him have, he feels, worked against him, particularly while a member of India’s colonial elite: “It had been his undoing . . . this susceptibility” (230).

It is because of Peter’s emotional vulnerability that Clarissa’s refusal of his proposal has had such an enormous impact upon his life. The reader is led to believe that Peter decided to enter colonial service in India partly as a result of her rejection of him, even though members of his family had served in India for three generations. As if to assuage the blow of Clarissa’s refusal, Peter married a woman he met on the boat to India, a development that disturbed Clarissa greatly. Twice during the course of the novel, Peter claims that his involvement with Clarissa has seriously injured him emotionally. To himself he acknowledges that she “had sapped something in him permanently” (241); to Sally Seton he confesses that his relationship with Clarissa “had spoilt his life” (292). A brief, interrupted visit to Clarissa at midday leaves him in tears and embarrassed by what she has “reduced him to—a whimpering, snivelling old ass” (121).

Throughout the day, Peter spends much of his time in denial, trying to convince himself that he is no longer in love with Clarissa, but rather with Daisy, a twenty-four-year-old married woman with two small children whose pathetic effusiveness reassures him of his desirability (238). Peter also attempts to minimize his need for others: “one doesn’t want people after fifty” (120). In addition, he expends considerable mental energy trying to assure himself that his life has not been a failure: “his life was not over, not by any means” (64).<sup>11</sup>

This effort also involves coming to terms with his years of colonial service on behalf of the empire, about which he is quite ambivalent. Looking at his reflection in a plate-glass window, Peter sees a man of substance who, he likes to think, had wielded considerable influence as a colonial administrator (72). Returning to London after a five-year absence, he cannot resist admiring the achievements of English civilization, including “butlers; chow dogs; girls in their security,” despite his dislike of “India, and empire, and army” (82). While observing a squad of young recruits single-mindedly marching up Whitehall, he thinks, “one might laugh; but one had to respect it” (77).

Peter’s critique of the empire is also implicit in the distaste he continues to exhibit for Clarissa’s social role as an MP’s wife; she throws parties for Richard’s political benefit, but Peter thinks Richard would be “happier farming in Norfolk” (116). Peter’s most intense feelings of dislike for the prevailing order find their focus in the figure of Hugh Whitbread, Clarissa’s old friend and a wealthy, servile court retainer. Throughout the day, Peter cannot avoid thinking of him with contempt, reducing him to “a first-rate

valet" (111). Indeed, Hugh's last name evokes rather appropriately the blandness and conventionality of his personality. That Peter's sentiments regarding Hugh are not entirely unjustified is also evidenced by similar assessments of him made independently during the day by Sally Seton and Richard Dalloway, who note that Hugh is becoming "an intolerable ass" (173).

Despite Peter's dislike of the social hierarchy and all it represents, he is still quite willing to be exposed to it and to Clarissa's annoyingly effusive social manner—"It is angelic—it is delicious of you to have come!," she gushes to Lord Gayton (270)—in deciding to go to the Dalloways' party. Although refusing to acknowledge fully his need for others, he justifies his decision to attend by admitting his need to interact with them (244). But what draws him most powerfully to the party is the presence of the woman with whom—try as he may to deny it—he is still in love: "What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? . . . It is Clarissa, he said" (296).<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately Peter must be viewed as something of an outsider—one whose unusual sensitivity, broad intellectual interests, and critical mind have set him apart from many of his colleagues in service to the empire. Despite his great charm and his self-acknowledged dependency upon women, he remains a rather pathetic figure—as Sally Seton observes, "an oddity, a sort of sprite" (289). He is also made to appear rootless, having "no home, nowhere to go to" (289). Clarissa's house in Westminster remains the geographical center of his emotional life, but the welcome he can expect to receive there must always be measured at best.

In Septimus Warren Smith, Woolf depicts the ultimate form of alienation—madness, in this case brought on by service to the empire in the trenches of France. In a sense, Septimus represents what Jacob Flanders might have become had he returned to England after combat duty. Pronounced differences in temperament, however, may well have predisposed Septimus to suffer an extreme reaction to the horrors of war that Jacob would have been able to resist, had he lived. The narrator presents Septimus as one of any number of young, unsophisticated idealists from the provinces cherishing the age-old dream of moving to a big city and becoming a great poet or writer (127). Somewhat condescendingly, the narrator describes Septimus as "one of those half-educated, self-educated men" who has acquired his learning after work from library books chosen "on the advice of well-known authors consulted by letter" (127).

Prior to the war, Septimus worked as a promising young clerk at an estate agent's office; in the evening, he attended Miss Isabel Pole's lectures on Shakespeare in Waterloo Road.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps flattered by his adulation, Miss Pole fueled his sense of being destined for greatness by lending him books and sending him notes: "Was he not like Keats? she asked" (128). As a result of her encouragement, Septimus became enamored of both Miss Pole and the world of ideas; as the narrator satirically notes, one might have found him on any night "finishing a masterpiece at three o'clock in the morning and running out to pace the streets" (129).

Septimus's naïve idealism was such that he was among the first to enlist when his country entered the war, hoping

. . . to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square. (130)

His laudable conduct won him the admiration and love of Evans, his officer, and the two became inseparable.<sup>14</sup> Not until Septimus became engaged to Lucrezia, a young Milanese hat-maker, did he realize that something was awry. His initial pride in having felt so little upon Evans's death prior to the Armistice (130) turned into horror as he realized that he could no longer feel; this becomes the "appalling crime" for which he believes he is "condemned to death by human nature" (145) in the form of Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, his physicians.

Although Septimus is completely at the mercy of his mental illness,<sup>15</sup> the forms his madness takes and the brief moments of sanity he occasionally experiences reveal a highly developed sensibility and a critical mind that might have been well suited to creative activity had his experience been other than it was. Septimus's euphoric moods are frequently stimulated by the beauty he perceives in the world around him. Resting in a chair in Regent's Park, he is both soothed and elated by what he sees around him:

. . . wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper; and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks—all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere. (104–5)

Septimus retains this Keatsian capacity to enjoy the physical world—indeed, sheer existence itself—up to the last minutes of his life. Sitting on the sill of the window from which he throws himself, he pauses:

He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did *they* want? (226)<sup>16</sup>

Even in his madness, Septimus shows his creative bent. While seated in Regent's Park, he sings "an immortal ode to Time," with Evans's voice answering his antiphonally from behind a tree (105). In the boardinghouse room Septimus shares with his young wife is a table drawer containing sheets of paper bearing his thoughts, ideas, and curious drawings (223). During a rare moment of lucidity, Septimus aids his wife in designing a hat, showing "a wonderful eye" in selecting and arranging colored material (217).

Septimus's critical abilities extend beyond the visual, however. During his first consultation with Sir William Bradshaw, who has taken over his

case, mention of the war evokes in his mind the image of a “little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder” (145). When Bradshaw announces that Septimus will be sent to a home for the disturbed in the countryside, Septimus cannot resist remarking with caustic wit, “‘One of Holmes’s homes?’” (147). Mad though he is, Septimus never fails to understand what is most repulsive about such overbearing individuals as Holmes and Bradshaw, and the damage they are capable of inflicting upon the lives of others. To Septimus, they represent predatory humanity at its worst, manifestations of Tennyson’s “Nature, red in tooth and claw” in human form:

Human nature . . . was on him—the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him. (139)

Clarissa Dalloway articulates more clearly what Septimus rightly detects in her own reaction to Bradshaw while thinking about Septimus’s suicide later in the evening, acknowledging the physician’s professional stature, but also sensing him to be “obscurely evil . . . capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul, that was it” (281).<sup>17</sup> As she reasons further, if Septimus has been exposed to Bradshaw’s power as a patient, he might well have concluded, “Life is made intolerable” (281).

Indeed, this is precisely Septimus’s fate. His quarrel has never been with existence itself or with the physical world, which he greatly enjoys and appreciates. Rather, his great sensitivity and emotional vulnerability have rendered him unfit for the rigors of twentieth-century life. Initially victimized by his service on behalf of the empire in France, he faces further victimization by Sir William Bradshaw, also in service to the empire, who threatens to separate him from his wife—his last link to human society and fellowship. His suicide is rendered not as submission to a longing for death but as a final act of the will, an assertion of his independence: “Holmes was at the door. ‘I’ll give it you!’” he shouts before he throws himself from the window (226).

Clarissa understands this full well, sensing her kinship with Septimus: “She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away” (283). For a willful woman in questionable health who frequently considers her own mortality and relentlessly celebrates life, the thought of Septimus’s act sparks a momentary sense of relief and liberation—a reprieve in the constant struggle to create meaning and order: “He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” (284).<sup>18</sup> As for Septimus, in choosing to take his own life, he defies the prevailing order and asserts his autonomy, reclaiming control over his life in the act of ending it, something that his culture has prevented him from doing for quite some time.