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Upper Class Snobbery and Privilege in *Mrs Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is a direct attack on the 1920s vapidness found in upper-class British society. Virginia Woolf herself lived in an upper-class family and saw first hand the nature of upper class Britain. The novel is portrayed through the eyes of different characters who are switched around in seamless transitions. Through the actions and behaviors of different characters, the reader is presented with the overarching privilege found in the upper-class society and how it separates these characters from the other classes in society. Woolf targets upper-class British society to show the privilege and snobbery possessing upper-class British society through the thoughts and actions of different characters in this class.

An example of this is found in Sir William Bradshaw, a character who embodies Woolf's depiction of the standard upper-class British male. He's British and incredibly proud of being British. He believes in Proportion and Conversion, which presents him as a scientist and authority figure rather than a caretaker. As stated by the narrator, "Sir Williams said he never spoke of madness; he called it not having a sense of proportion" (96). Sir Williams' method of helping people is forcing them to rest in complete solitude until they regain what he defines as "proportion." Only through weight gain, being removed from everyone they love and banished from having kids could a person restore what he saw as proportion. Bradshaw, upon first meeting Septimus, concludes that his problems could be easily explained: "It was a case of complete

breakdown, complete physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage. He ascertained in two or three minutes" (95). The fact that Bradshaw diagnosed Septimus after two or three minutes of just observing him demonstrates how little he cares about his patients. Bradshaw only cares to elevate his reputation and social status. He drowns out the importance of his patient, instead focuses on himself, as the narrator claims, "Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion" (99). As described by Ban Wang in his essay *Crisis of Identity*: "These moral values are vital to the maintenance of bourgeois society, and it is Sir William's arduous task to bring his patients, who have gone astray from the beaten track of identity assigned by society, to a sense of proportion. His job is to convert them from their antisocial impulses to conformity" (Wang 10). Bradshaw devours people and converts them back into what he views is a proper life in society. He has a sense of privilege and snobbery, believing only his will is correct. His idea of conversion also devours his wife. She loses herself and is eaten away: "There was no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, waterlogged, of her will into his" (100). He converts others into believing only brilliant careers, family, and courage matter, which eventually allows Septimus to commit suicide without proper treatment.

It's important to note that when Septimus committed suicide, Clarissa was considerably moved by his action. She viewed his suicide as an attempt of communication and a form of rebellion towards forced treatment. This alone makes her think of the Bradshaws as evil members in society. However, she is insincerely attentive to the people of status that she dislikes, as Bell notes in her essay *Misreading Mrs. Dalloway*, "Clarissa lacks a meaningful connection to

the real world" (Bell 7). Clarissa instead believes status and throwing parties are her only gifts, causing her to become very consumed by her world and have no interest in expanding her horizons. Her archenemy, Mrs. Kilman, embodies everything Clarrisa opposes. As stated by Bell "She is Clarissa's true antitype in the novel: unattractive, sullen, ungifted socially, dowdy, poor, passionate, un-English, politically radical, and religious" (Bell 9) Yet with her flaws Mrs. Kilman does not value the superficial status that Clarrisa has dedicated her life to preserving. Mrs. Kilman sees Clarissa for who she is: someone living a lie consumed with privilege and status. Their social differences create an impassable boundary that makes it impossible for these two to sympathize or become friends. Yet, Mrs. Kilman is difficult to sympathize with due to her raging hatred for Clarissa. Mrs Kilman believes Clarissa's life was handed to her, and she is undeserving of all she has been given. Though this may be true, it presents to the reader opposing poles of socioeconomic statuses coming into conflict with one another. Woolf's choice to include the relationship between Clarissa and Mrs. Kilman illustrates the tension between the upper and lower class in British society.

Clarissa is, however, quite narcissistic when she has her last thought of Septimus. Clarissa feels connected to his purpose and reflects on his suicide as an insight into her own life, in a sense taking it from Septimus. Still, after this short moment of empathy, she slips back into her character as a hostess and assembles herself back into the little world she had formed for herself. She must live to the social standard of her upper-class life, despite her lingering doubts about her purpose within it.

Clarrissa is almost blinded completely by her perspective. She seems to believe things that do not occur in her immediate surroundings do not occur at all. For example, she gives no

second thought towards the Armenian genocide after hearing about it: "Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again)- no she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? But she loved her roses (didn't that help the Armenians?)-the only flowers she could bear to see cut" (120). She could not even remember the names of the people who were murdered because of how little she cares, and even admits her apathy to herself. She instead focuses much more on her roses, which are more relevant to her than the genocide. This further illustrates her privileged and snobby nature. She has a delusionary perspective on what matters and seems to have been pulled into a life of superficial meaning. Yet what makes her character so complex is that through short hints, she appears to show the capability of feeling and breaking out of her delusions to pursue a deeper meaning to life. Each time, though, she quickly forgets these feelings and retreats back into her world. It's important to note that this may be a protective procedure, as she has mentioned on several occasions that she has anxiety and fear about simple things such as crossing the road. On the surface, she is very shallow, but in reality, her character is far more in-depth, facing a constant battle between her past choices and the life she lives now. Perhaps she chooses contentment out of a fear that a closer look at her life will disappoint her.

Lady Bruton embodies an unrealistic level of entitlement and privilege sourced from her own grandparents' achievement, as Wang notes, "Lady Bruton's identity is constructed in the discourse of moribund imperialism and colonialism. She is able to gain a sense of her identity simply by looking at pictures of her family, a family of military men, administrators, admirals" (Wang 10). Thinking of her past elevates her sense of worth and privilege. It is how she guides herself in the world. It's also important to note that Lady Bruton will only surround herself with

successful men. Lady Bruton inhibits "manly" characteristics as the narrator mentions, "Lady Bruton had the reputation of being more interested in politics than people; of talking like a man (105)". It is likely that Lady Bruton is living up to the identity of her ancestors. Since everyone was male, in a commanding position, and involved politically this may be her method of living up to her legacy. Yet It's odd that she never invites the wives of these men to any of their gatherings. Lady Bruton sees "illness in the wives of politicians" (164). Yet more than seeing illness, maybe she categorizes herself with successful men and views these wives as interfering with "man" business. Lady Bruton displays signs of snobbery, acting as if she is superior to the men's wives because of her political status. She acts in an anti-feminist nature, categorizing women into a certain standard beneath herself. She is snobby and privileged to believe her social status has placed her above the men's wives.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the upper class is portrayed as being overly privileged and snobby. Through the eyes of different characters and utilizing seamless transitions, the narrator hops around listening and commenting on what each character is thinking at a given moment. Through the thoughts and actions of different characters, the reader is presented with the delusional sense of worth found in the British upper class. Woolf attacks upper-class society to show how snobbery and privilege separate these characters from other classes. Woolf utilizes her own experience to accurately tell and demonstrate how being privileged and snobby only hurts society and all the members involved.

Work Cited

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