

The dark feminine and female “hysteria”: a comparison of female psychology in response to the patriarchy using a modernist feminist text, *Mrs. Dalloway*, with a popular contemporary work, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

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### **Abstract**

This essay will explore the feminized psychology of female characters in both *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Otessa Moshfegh. In Woolf’s novel, the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway represents the burden of gender roles placed on women in the 1900s in a society where domestic work was largely relegated to women, including the duties of marriage and motherhood. Clarissa’s disillusionment relating to her own place in society and her anxiety about her daughter demonstrate the psychological stress caused by the patriarchy and gender expectations. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the anonymous female narrator demonstrates the modern equivalent of *Mrs. Dalloway*, focusing on a female character hardened by her chaotic upbringing and societal pressures of beauty. Both characters suffer from signs of depression and anxiety, despite the lack of explicit diagnosis in both novels. By comparing these two texts, I will explore female psychology in response to the patriarchy using a modernist feminist novel with a popular contemporary work, demonstrating that in the span of a century, the disorders women experience are a result societal pressures, rather than a simple biological explanation.

### **Introduction**

Historically, when exhibiting negative character traits or emotions, such as antisocial behavior, withdrawal, depression, anger, anxiety, or sadness, women have been described as suffering from “female hysteria.” Though the medical diagnosis of this condition has since been deconstructed in the 21st century, for the greater part of the 19th and 20th centuries, this

terminology was used to describe undesirable behavior exhibited by females, usually reported by male relatives. For a woman to be diagnosed with hysteria as a physical illness, she would need to exhibit “ungovernable” behavior. Hysteria was commonly described as a sex-selective disorder, meaning women were the only ones affected by it. Because of the high volume of women diagnosed with hysteria in the 18th and 19th century, the root of the disorder was thought to be biological; women were considered to be inclined to develop mental disorders because of their sex. This disorder was found listed in the DSM—the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—up until 1980 and largely believed to be a result of repressed psychological trauma as a result of Freudian psychology. The common understanding established with the diagnosis of hysteria was that, because women lacked the same genetic make-up as men, and because their sex was believed to be inferior, women developed signs of madness to cope with their lack of male sexuality. Treatments for hysteria included marital sex, pregnancy, or other treatments surrounding fulfilling “gender roles.”

In literature, female characters who exhibit unsavory behaviors or emotions, much like women in the 18th and 19th century who exhibited symptoms of “hysteria”, are categorized as suffering from mental illness. However, the cause of their mental distress, in the cases of Clarissa Dalloway and the anonymous narrator, can be traced back to environmental pressures and gender roles enforced by a male-dominant society. This cause-and-effect mapping draws a parallel to the history of female hysteria and the treatment of women in psychology throughout history.

### **Literature Review**

Feminist critical theory surrounding the topic of female characters and mental illness, specifically as a reaction to the patriarchy, has been explored across a variety of genres. Outside of literature, scholars in the medical field conducted research on gender identity and mental

illness, specifically the diagnosis of women in society with mental illness and psychiatry as a method of control, maintaining their marginalization in society. In combining these two critiques, my goal is to show how the intersection of gender and psychology remain largely influenced by patriarchal ideals, as both a catalyst for certain disorders and as a dominant authority in their treatment and reception in society.

### **Methodologies**

For this essay, my primary audience will be academics interested in the psychology of characters and previewing literature through a feminist lens. My paper will be both exploratory and argumentative, keeping in mind that my own expertise is limited in the field of medicine. However, using a qualitative approach and comparing the moods, emotions, thoughts, and actions of the characters—in this case Clarissa Dalloway and the unnamed narrator—to medical reviews surrounding female psychological symptoms, I hope to demonstrate that the signs both characters exhibit are a result of environmental pressures. The goal of this paper is to prove that female characters in the 20th and 21st century suffer from psychological distress as a result of the patriarchy. In order to prove this, I will also use historical context, such as the condition of “hysteria” often assigned to women as a natural biological response, rather than a disorder which arises due to the pressures of gender roles and expectations.

### **Outline**

The beginning of my paper will provide historical context, demonstrating the foundation for current issues regarding female psychology. This section of the paper will largely focus on medical history and the social issues or constructs that have contributed to the idea of female hysteria. In order to accurately compare and contrast a novel from the 1920s with a contemporary piece, I will need to first show the ways that medical perspective on female

psychology has changed, as well as how they have stayed the same. Building off of this, I will also compare and contrast the historical context of social norms or gender roles in order to contextualize the life and expectations of the protagonists in the novels. It is important to note that Clarissa Dalloway's psychological characterizations are largely influenced by her status in society as a housewife and the opportunities afforded to her as a woman. In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the narrator exists in a much more progressive time; however, her issues are still a result of the patriarchal society, including gender expectations relating to beauty and relationships.

The second and greater part of my essay will focus specifically on how the characterization of Clarissa and the narrator reveals the environmental pressures responsible for their mental states. By defining Clarissa and the Narrator through qualitative analysis, and comparing their symptoms to the symptoms of psychological disorders listed in the DSM V, I hope to show that the women in the novels suffer from real medical disorders and their distress is primarily due to patriarchal gender pressures. Ultimately, I will show how female hysteria, once thought to be a real disorder, and the mental state of the aforementioned characters, are a direct result of male influence on women in society.

### *Works Cited*

#### Primary Sources

Moshfegh, Ottessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Penguin Press, 2018.

This book follows an unknown female narrator as she navigates through a psychological breakdown. The protagonist, best characterized as an anti-hero, abuses narcotics by manipulating her psychiatrist in efforts to go through a "rebirth," thus fixing her mental state and allowing her to finally be free to live a life of enjoyment. This primary source will be used to show how even in the present, "female hysteria" or the dark feminine is

still present as a reaction to the patriarchy. The character is unlikable and exhibits psychological distress as a result of feminine expectations.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Union Square & Co, 2023.

This novel details the lives of many characters in a stream of consciousness style text. The main protagonist, Clarissa, experiences disillusionment in a post-war society and in a time where women faced inequality and all aspects of life. Clarissa as a comparison to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* shows the female psychology of the 1900s as a result of lack of autonomy in society.

### Secondary Sources

Chodoff, P. (1982). Hysteria and women. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 139(5), 545–551. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.139.5.545>

Explores the historical record regarding hysteria, which through the ages has been considered to be a female disease, and concludes that the hysterical (histrionic) personality is a caricature of femininity. It develops under the influence of cultural forces, particularly male domination, and is not a natural attribute of women. This article provides information for the basis of my argument, which is that female psychological disorders are a symptom of societal pressures caused by patriarchal institutions. The history of hysteria and women will provide context for my argument, which I will also apply to the contemporary text.

Chuick, Christopher D., et al. "A Qualitative Investigation of Depression in Men." *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, vol. 10, no. 4, 6 June 2009, pp. 302–313., <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016672>.

This journal explores the typical and atypical presentation of symptoms of depression in men from ages 20-70, providing insight on the assumed characteristics of men who suffer from mental health issues. What stood out to me most about this article is the exploration of masculinity as a stressor for depression and how the patriarchy affects men who experience depression. This will be used as a potential counterargument to my thesis, since my focus is on women. However, this article compares the gender differences associated with depression and their reception in society, as well as in the medical context.

DeMeester, Karen. "Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 44 no. 3, 1998, p. 649-673. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/mfs.1998.0062.

This article discusses the various psychological disorders found in an array of characters

throughout the novel. However, I will be focusing specifically on Clarissa Dalloway. I am interested in the psychoanalysis of the text and connecting it to Mrs. Dalloway's development of mental health issues as a symptom of her status in society.

Ivana, I.M. "In Praise of Unlikeable Women: Exploring Unlikeability in 'Postfeminist' Times in My Year of Rest and Relaxation and Fleabag." *Utrecht University Student Theses Repository*, 2020, <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/36537>. Accessed 2022. This text explores how in the contemporary age, women that are present antisocial or unsavory traits are then characterized as unlikeable. This critical feminist reading of both the novel and another media source delves into female psychology and the portrayal of "unfeminine" traits as negative. This reveals that the societal pressures once thought to have been lifted in the contemporary age are still just as prevalent as they were in the 1900s.

Smith, Susan Bennett. "Reinventing Grief Work: Virginia Woolf's Feminist Representations of Mourning in Mrs. Dalloway and to the Lighthouse." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 41, no. 4, 1995, p. 310., <https://doi.org/10.2307/441533>. Smith explores the duality between the characters Clarissa and Septimus, and their expressions of grief in society. Though much of Smith's argument is focused on Septimus and the effects of masculinity on his treatment and eventual death, Smith also articulates an important aspect of Victorian mourning in women and how it affects the feminine characterization of Clarissa. Specifically, Smith asserts that Clarissa's emotional reaction to societal pressures and existential dread paints her a "cold," "lacking," and therefore unfeminine character.

Yakira Paley, Fayga. 2019, *Stressed, Depressed, and Sexually Repressed: Patriarchy and Depression in The Bell Jar*. Yakira Paley examines the social constructs surrounding femininity within the 1950s text, *The Bell Jar*. Though not one of my primary sources, *The Bell Jar* is an example in which mental illness in women is a side effect of environmental pressures created by feminine expectations at this time. In examining this work, I hope to better understand how the literary text reflects a female character shaped by her time period and therefore a tangible example of psychological distress caused by existing in this time as a woman.