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Erika Nichole Jackson

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Diagnoses by Gender: The Consequences of Treatment of the Mentally Ill in Virginia

Woolf's *The Waves* and *Mrs. Dalloway*

By

Erika Nichole Jackson

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Master of the Arts in English

Department of English, School of Arts and Sciences

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

COLLEGE AT CORTLAND

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“Insanity is purely a disease of the brain...The physician is now the responsible guardian of the lunatic, and must ever remain so.”  
Sir John Charles Bucknill (1897)

Mental illness has consistently been and continues to be a subject that is viewed as taboo by society, especially when it comes to diagnosing a patient. Instead of acknowledging a person's actions, thoughts, and words, society continually disregards mental illness as something that is negative and to be feared. The fact that this area of medicine can be difficult and distressing makes it all the more important to continue research. It is true that people in this field are constantly working to normalize the impact of mental illness. However, those who do not understand or who fear the subject may be prone to missing important societal implications that stem from the treatment of those with mental disorders. For this reason, novels like *The Waves* and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf are especially important in bringing to light the varying treatments of the mentally ill. Through the struggles of Rhoda and Septimus, Woolf explores the striking difference in treatment of mental illness between male and female patients and the repercussions of these actions during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Women authors are more likely to commit suicide on account of mental illness. Virginia Woolf is one of these talented females who became overwhelmed by the pressures of society, her own mind, and the failure of her mental “guardian.” In order to truly understand the issues that Woolf faced, one must delve into her life, her letters, and her stories. Literary critics have done just that, some focusing on her illness, while others have decided that this is not a major influence in her works. One critic, Thomas Szasz, disagrees with the idea that Woolf was suffering from mental illness:

she was told that she was mad, others defined her as ‘mad.’ No one at age thirteen has the information or power necessary to rebut such a ‘diagnosis,’ to reject the

mad role. Tragically, she never made a serious attempt to do so. On the contrary, she embraced the role and made playing it an integral part of her life strategy—to her profit as well as her peril (16).

This argument is interesting, as there is still research to be done considering children and their malleability or ability to define themselves apart from society's expectations.

However, to completely disregard what many have seen as Woolf's mental illness as nonexistent or insincere leads to a problem similar to what Woolf is warning readers about in her novels. Without proper attention and care, without someone taking their differing behavior into account, those with mental illness will more than likely experience worsening symptoms. The reader can also look to Woolf's own diaries to find that Szasz's interpretation of mental illness is not entirely true. She writes, "Also my own psychology interests me. I intend to keep full notes of my ups & downs, for my private information. And thus objectified, the pain & shame becomes at once much less" (qtd. in Caramagno 35). Through this expression of Woolf, the reader learns that she did not share all of what she was experiencing with those around her. Her words refute the idea that she used the role of mentally ill to profit or as any kind of strategy; instead it was something she was suffering and trying to minimize, yet learn from.

If we as readers are to accept that Woolf was indeed afflicted with something more than attention seeking, then it is easy to see the nature of what she was facing through her life stories. She was consistently wary of her doctors, once stating "I am discharged cured! Ain't it a joke?" (qtd. In Trombley 81). Being mistreated and misunderstood by her psychiatric doctors, Woolf used her writing to analyze this issue through her characters. Rhoda, from *The Waves* (1931), is an introverted character who

shows signs and symptoms of the illness melancholia. Septimus Warren Smith, from *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), returns from war with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or “shell shock” as it was known in the 1920s. Through the struggles of these two characters, Woolf explores the increasing social visibility of men’s mental illness by the medical field, while women experienced the exact opposite. The similarity in expression of psychological illness in Rhoda and Septimus provides for a telling analysis of the differences in the medical field’s handling of cases between the sexes. While the field of psychiatry was growing during the twentieth century, Woolf suggests in her novels that there was a lapse in understanding, social awareness, and treatment when it came to illnesses experienced by women.

## **MADNESS**

As stated earlier, it is important to thoroughly understand the life of Virginia Woolf before assuming that we understand what she was writing. *The Waves* was written during a time in which Woolf felt uncomfortable in her body and mind. Woolf’s husband, Leonard, described society’s view of Woolf by stating that “[People] did not merely stop and stare and nudge one another; there was something in Virginia they found ridiculous” (Trombley 13). People would fixate on Woolf because something about her seemed different from themselves. This fascination with her character began during childhood as tragedy struck her life multiple times. When Woolf was thirteen her mother, Julia Stephens, died. Woolf described her mother in saying, “I think her service, when it was not purely practical, lay in simply helping people by the light of her judgement and experience” (Caramagno 118). Although there may not be an overarching feeling of love and caring in this statement, there is an obvious tone of deference and respect. In losing

her mother, Woolf was losing “someone who could be talked to” (118). This death was followed directly by her first bout of depression. The way that Woolf’s nephew discusses this incident is very telling as he calls it her “‘first breakdown’ or *whatever we are to call it*” (qtd. in Szasz 16). Even in this statement made by a close family member one can decipher an air of skepticism towards Woolf’s illness.

Nine years later, Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephens, died. Woolf’s relationship with her father was tumultuous as she stated in a diary entry after his death, “his life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; -- Inconceivable” (qtd. 128 Caramagno). Woolf and her father had very differing ideas of how literature should be written. However, she still felt a certain amount of sadness and loss at his death. In a letter closely following, she wrote about her “worry that she had not given her father the comfort he needed” (132). After his death she suffered another episode. In the first twenty or so years of her life Woolf had lost two people who were close to her. This could cause any person to fall into a depression, but Woolf’s agitation goes further than sadness.

As Woolf grew older, she continued to be surrounded by less than ideal situations. Her marriage to Leonard Woolf, while mostly satisfactory, had a few unsteady periods due to her mental instability. While Woolf was not interested in sexual relations at all, she did want children. She hesitated to accept Leonard’s proposal due to her fear of the emotional and sexual aspects of marriage. Because of this, her feelings towards Leonard wavered from absolute attraction to abhorrence. She wrote in a letter to Leonard, “As I told you brutally the other day, I feel no physical attraction to you. There are moments—when you kissed me the other day was one—when I feel no more than a rock”

(Caramagno 496). This same letter holds statements on the complete opposite of the spectrum including, “I want everything—love, children, adventure, intimacy, work” and “I sometimes think that if I married you, I could have everything” (496). Through Woolf, one can tell that even with the existence of some attachment, being placed in a situation where emotions are constantly fluctuating can bring about symptoms of a mental disorder.

Woolf’s experimenting with the style of writing called stream of consciousness can be utilized to further the argument for her mental illness. Originally coined as a psychological term, stream of consciousness became an innovative writing technique that authors could use to indicate the presentation of “psychological aspects of characters in fiction” (Humphrey 1). This description is taken a step further by critic Guiseppina Balossi who states, “through stream of consciousness techniques, [writers] started to give detailed presentations, rather than descriptions, of the many aspects of human personality, and the workings of the mind” (15). That is, authors focus on the detailed consciousness, or thoughts, of the characters within their writing. Author and lecturer Robert Humphrey describes stream of consciousness using the analogy of an iceberg. He says “stream-of-consciousness fiction is...greatly concerned with what lies below the surface” (4). In order to extrapolate on Woolf’s intentions with her novels, one must also consider what lies below the surface within her writing, what hidden meanings or societal issues she is bringing to light with her characters and this new writing style. For the purposes of this paper, it is inferred that by using stream-of-consciousness as a basis for her writing, Woolf is displaying the importance of paying attention to the mental state of characters, the “workings” of their minds.

The consciousness of Rhoda, in *The Waves*, is quite similar to what critics believe would have been Woolf's, considering what is known from Woolf's novels, letters, and diary entries. A common diagnosis of women who showed characteristics differing from the expected norm, especially those with creative tendencies, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was hysteria. The term hysteria dates back to the Greek word *hysteria*, "uterus," "when it was thought that the uterus became physically displaced from its normal position in the pelvis, wandering throughout the body to create symptoms in the various places that it inhabited" (North 498). In 1697, an English physician was able to move the origin of the disorder from the uterus to the central nervous system in order to regard hysteria "as an emotional condition rather than a physical condition" (498). The history of this disorder is long and constantly changing, but the one aspect that remained unchanged for many years was that this syndrome encompassed a wide variety of symptoms that women would complain of (Veith 1). "Hysteria" is no longer in the medical dictionary due to the fact that it was such an overarching disease that included a number of medical and mental conditions regarded as separate and distinguishable today (Veith 273).

A mental illness that came to light from this change was melancholia, "a pathological form of mourning," a loss that leads to multiple symptoms such as sleeplessness, disembodiment, and emotional detachment (Eng 1276). While similar to hysteria, melancholia is more specific in terms of identification. Readers can take the definition of this term a step further by analyzing the U.S. National Library of Medicine's (NLM) clinical features of melancholia which include the following: "Disturbances in affect disproportionate to stressors, marked by unremitting apprehension and morbid



statements, blunted emotional response, nonreactive mood”; “Psychomotor disturbance expressed as[... ]spontaneous agitation”; “cognitive impairment with reduced concentration and working memory”; and “vegetative dysfunction manifested as interrupted sleep, loss of appetite and weight, reduced libido, and diurnal variation” (NLM). Any of these symptoms could be easily attributed to Rhoda and Septimus. Melancholia, stemming from loss, is something that could also define Woolf’s condition as she faced multiple bouts of mourning early in her lifetime.

Another psychological disease that is popular in diagnosing Woolf is Manic-Depressiveness. In his famous work, *The Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf’s Art and Manic-Depressive Illness*, Thomas C. Caramagno uses knowledge from the psychiatric field as well as excerpts from Woolf’s letters and diaries to help readers understand how this illness fits. Caramagno defines this type of psychosis as “a severe mood disturbance in which prolonged periods of inappropriate depression alternate either with periods of normal mood or with periods of excessive, inappropriate euphoria and mania” (qtd. in Caramagno 33). The reader receives an outsider’s perspective on how Virginia falls into this category through the biography written by Quentin Bell in which he records one of her episodes:

[Virginia] became painfully excitable and nervous and then intolerably depressed...she went through a period of morbid self-criticism, blamed herself for being vain and egotistical, compared herself unfavourably to Vanessa and was at the same time intensely irritable (qtd. in Caramagno 53).

This is one among many episodes that can be found both in Bell’s biography as well as Woolf’s own letters and diaries. There were times when she would be in the deepest

despair, and others when her imagination was in overdrive with exciting stories and anecdotes (Caramagno 49). Her emotions and attitudes were constantly fluctuating, giving evidence to the fact that whether or not she was specifically suffering from manic-depressiveness or melancholia, there was surely something upsetting her emotional balance. This becomes important in Woolf's writings as one can find many of her sufferings written into the lives of her characters.

## **RHODA**

While awareness about mental illness was developing within the medical community during the Victorian period, support for women like Rhoda from *The Waves* was rare. The lack of medical information, added to the stress of not being able to interact with her friends and society, deteriorates Rhoda's mental state in a way similar to a patient with melancholia. Woolf shows agitation about the unfair treatment that she herself was receiving from society through her characterization of Rhoda, whom critic Garrett Stewart calls "the most extravagant avatar of discontinuity in modern fiction" (Oxindine 204). *The Waves* follows the lives of six children, three girls and three boys. It begins when the children are attending school, and ends with one of the male characters, Bernard, giving an account of how each character lived out his or her life after middle age. Rhoda, the youngest female, is constantly ostracized by the others and seems to live by her own rules, representing discontinuance because she cannot be cohesive or intimate with those in her community. While being an outcast does not automatically constitute one as mentally ill, Rhoda's inability to integrate goes further than purely not getting along with her fellow students.

In order to truly understand the way in which a person's mind works, one usually needs to fully grasp that person's past. However, not much is known about Rhoda's past as Woolf makes almost no references to her having any family. The most information that the reader receives is from Rhoda's friend, Louis, who expresses to the reader that Rhoda has no father (Woolf 20). This statement is made early in the novel, informing the reader that Rhoda's father has not had much of a role, if any, in Rhoda's life.

Abandonment is often attributed to mental illness, noted in Sigmund Freud's "Types of Neurotic Nosogenesis." Freud states that as soon as a child is separated from gratification in the outside world, he or she becomes neurotic or mentally ill. Although Freud is mainly discussing sexual gratification, this reading can also be applied to the absence of parents or parental care. He states that deprivation can cause "incapacity" in "adaptation to reality" (65). If Rhoda was deprived of parental care as a child, this could be a major factor in her mental state and inability to cope with the outside world. Since there is no family information in *The Waves* for Rhoda, it cannot be assumed that something tragic happened in her childhood to cause injury to her mental welfare. However, the silence that this places in the narrative suggests that the reader fill in the blank with information found on the effects of parental absence.

One of the effects of Rhoda's mental illness, and possibly her lack in parental role model, is her inability to understand and meld with the female realm. She has difficulty fitting in with any of her friends in the novel, but most of all she does not have many similarities, if any, to the two other women in *The Waves*. Jinny and Susan fit perfectly into the roles that society held for women during the early twentieth century. Although these roles were changing in the time leading up to and during the 1920s, women were

continually struggling against gender ideals that had been set for them: “Middle class women represented the emotions, the Heart, or sometimes the Soul, seat of morality, and tenderness. Women performed these functions as keepers of the Hearth in the Home” (Davidoff 89). Women had been living in a “cult of domesticity” where they were made to be subordinate to their male counterparts (93). They were expected “to stay at home and attend to the household and family within certain precepts of good mothering and good housekeeping” (Kelley 726). Cleanliness was very important to being a proper female and motherhood was a role that women were supposed to willingly and excitedly take on. During one scene in particular, Susan dreams about her future:

I shall have children; I shall have maids in aprons; men with pitchforks; a kitchen where they bring the ailing lambs to warm in baskets, where the hams hang and the onions glisten. I shall be like my mother, silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards (Woolf 99).

Susan continues this dream for multiple pages and, to the reader, sounds willing and ready for these changes, fitting perfectly into the mold of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century wife and mother.

Jinny, the other female character who serves as a friend to Rhoda in the novel, represents the opposite of the morally sound female. She embodies the idea of the “new woman,” which was gaining attention during the early 1920s. The new woman was working outside of the home, as during World War One women held jobs while the men were absent. From 1901 until the end of World War One, women also began voting, obtaining an education, and engaging in other political processes (Kelley 726). Women were actively participating in activities and fashion that had been seen as masculine in the

past, such as smoking and wearing men's apparel (Doan 665). As a stand-in for this pathway, another term that could be used to loosely describe Jinny is "flapper." Prior to the 1920s, a "flapper" was used to describe a young prostitute or woman accustomed to "flightiness." This description remained during the 1920s, but expanded to include women who had boyish figures. Along with this boyish figure and dressing more like men, came pleasure seeking and sexual freedom (Doan 670-672). Jinny goes out with different men and sees nothing wrong with actions that others might consider to be promiscuous. She has an ease and sexuality that men recognize (Woolf 102). Through Susan and Jinny, the reader sees a model of the new woman in the 1920s and a woman of the Victorian Era, both structures in which Rhoda cannot take part.

Rhoda inhabits a space somewhere between these two women in regards to her femininity and cultural location. When she takes a glance into the looking-glass Rhoda thinks that she has no face. This is not to be taken literally; instead, it reveals that she feels as if she has no real identity: "I change and shift and am seen through in a second" (Woolf 43). Rhoda herself realizes her predicament in that there is no realm in which she feels comfortable, rendering her invisible not only to herself in the mirror but also to the rest of society. This thought could be read as a weakness, "a failure rather than a refusal to develop a sense of unified selfhood through entering the social sphere" (Myk 111). However, MaigorZata Myk believes that Rhoda uses her agency in refusing to subscribe while also becoming "painfully aware of the fact that no in-between position is available" to her (112). This allows her a degree of authority and insight as she is in charge of her destiny.

Even if Rhoda is actively refusing gender roles, the fact that she tries to conform during multiple instances cannot be ignored. Having no face in the mirror and no stability as a person causes her to change and fluctuate depending on whom she is around: “I leap high to excite their admiration” (44). No matter how hard Rhoda tries to conform, she can only do so by pretending she is someone other than herself and mimicking those who surround her. However, each time she tries to do so she once again fails to find her niche, which leads her to feelings of hopelessness and sadness, both common to those suffering from melancholia.

Some critics, such as Annette Oxidine, disagree with the idea that Rhoda’s inability to fit in can be ascribed a mental illness. Instead, Oxidine attributes this straying from society to characterizing Rhoda as a lesbian (204). However, in assuming lesbianism as the means for difference, Oxidine is blatantly ignoring important facts that point to an abnormality of the mind similar to melancholia. Rhoda makes a statement that many theorists use to support the view of her sexuality; she says, “I feared embraces” (Woolf 205). It is important to note that in this declaration Rhoda does not specify whose embraces she fears. This statement does not have to mean that she fears the touch of men in particular, especially as she says this shortly after leaving a relationship that she has been having with Louis. This fear can instead be attributed to pulling away from society, which Rhoda does throughout all of *The Waves*. As stated earlier, one of the top symptoms of melancholia or depression is emotional detachment or diminished emotional response. Rhoda does not want to touch others as she feels so emotionally detached from them that she has begun to fear any physical interaction. Bernard also explains that

“Rhoda loves to be alone” (133). This statement further supports the idea that Rhoda does not like having contact with anyone, regardless of gender.

This loss of interest in physical touch is only one facet of Rhoda that critics have used to make assumptions about her sexuality. Rhoda also has a strong response to the overpowering song of the boys whom she compares to tigers and render her speechless (Woolf 106-107). In her article, “Rhoda Submerged,” Oxidine discusses how, through this situation, Rhoda is responding to the overpowering song of the patriarchy (212). Patriarchy frames Rhoda’s, as well as Woolf’s, life; through this construction the dichotomous roles for women had been created. During the Victorian era, these roles included keeping quiet and subdued. In the early twentieth century, women who were fighting against this rule would be suppressed just as Rhoda feels. This scene could also be read with the element of animalization symbolizing a type of panic attack for Rhoda. Critic Guiseppina Balossi states, “we understand that Rhoda is traumatized by being confronted with people who make her feel under attack” (140). Although speaking of a different moment, both capture a fearful Rhoda comparing people around her to tigers. Therefore, having such a visceral response to the boys does not necessarily deem Rhoda a lesbian. It could merely be the natural response that she has to the patriarchy that has rendered her speechless and attacked her for her differences.

In the end, the majority of Oxidine’s evidence is taken from previous drafts of *The Waves*, which Woolf decided to leave out in her final publication. Oxidine discusses a possible love interest who was written into holograph one of Woolf’s novel. This love interest of Rhoda’s takes the shape of a girl named Alice. Oxidine states, “At a young age, Rhoda understands that her desires to live out a ‘wondrous story’ with another girl

must be relegated to another world” (215). Woolf may have found this important when writing the first drafts of *The Waves*, but the fact that she took all mention of Alice out of the final version of the novel tells the reader that Woolf most likely did not want Rhoda’s sexuality to be the main focus for her readers.

By focusing entirely on sexual identity, critics have missed the importance of Rhoda’s medical condition and the role that society and Rhoda’s friends play in worsening her mental stability. Through all of the issues that Rhoda is encountering, seemingly alone, the reader begins to wonder about the presence of her friends in the novel. The five other main characters in *The Waves* all notice Rhoda’s differences including the females that she struggles to identify with. For example, Jinny describes Rhoda’s face as “mooning” and “vacant” (Woolf 41). She sees that Rhoda is disconnected from the world, but makes no strides towards helping her reconnect or trying to understand her. Rhoda seems to look up to Jinny and Susan, in that she tries to emulate them in order to find a place of similarity and consistency. However, Rhoda soon realizes that these older girls do not enjoy her imitations as she thinks to herself, “Both despise me for copying what they do” (43). One would think that the two females in the novel would want to help Rhoda the most, especially Susan who captures the essence of the mother figure. However, at no point do either of these girls show that they truly care about Rhoda or want to help subside her anguish.

The other characters in the novel also exacerbate Rhoda’s issues further by constantly either ignoring or teasing her. Louis himself, who seems to be the only one capable of relating to and actually communicating with Rhoda, admits to treating her in a manner opposite to how one typically thinks a friend should. Louis describes this



behavior in the novel: “We wake her. We torture her. She dreads us, yet comes cringing to our sides” (Woolf 120). In saying this, Louis is revealing that while Rhoda is fearful of these other characters, she considers them her only friends or acquaintances. She realizes that she has nobody else to rely on, no other part of society to ground her besides these “friends” who constantly bait her. Louis supports this statement by saying, later in the novel, that the friends pierced Rhoda as old men with pointed sticks “pierce little bits of paper” (203). Through this, the reader is given the image of Rhoda’s friends constantly tearing this poor creature apart. Equating Rhoda to little bits of paper in this analogy, Louis is giving the reader an insight into how insignificant Rhoda is to her fellow classmates. This imagery also gives further awareness to the way in which Rhoda is perceived by others; as a piece of paper she is flimsy and easily torn and forgotten. It is curious and depressing that her friends realize the fragility of her character, yet pursue it further with negative actions.

Throughout the novel, Rhoda is accompanied by the idea of absence. Whether it is absence of emotion, absence of friends, or absence of her literal character, there is always something missing where Rhoda is involved. For example, whereas the rest of her friends pair off throughout the novel, she is constantly by herself. She does have a short relationship with Louis, but this becomes a negative experience as the reader has seen that he joins in with the torturing of Rhoda. Louis discusses the friends playing together and says, “Up here Bernard, Neville, Jinny, and Susan (but not Rhoda) skim flower beds with their nets” (13). Whether this is because Rhoda does not want to be with them, or they have left her out intentionally, the reader does not know. However, it is important to note that Louis has specifically referenced Rhoda being absent. This aside is made in

such a way that Rhoda's absence is almost made the most important piece of this moment; the reader cannot ignore the fact that she is not there and that the friends do not seem to mind her absence. They go along with their activities, enjoying each other's company, and not even noticing the fact that Rhoda is missing (except for Louis' short but telling aside).

Rhoda also shows lack of expression in comparison to her friends when it comes to Percival's death, a character who travels to India and is not frequently seen in the novel, but is beloved by the group. Neville outright mourns the death of the character assumed to be his lover saying, "Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob. I sob" (Woolf 152). Bernard suffers similarly although his struggle with sadness is paralleled with the joy of the birth of his son; "I do not know which is sorrow, which is joy. My son is born; Percival is dead. I am upheld by pillars, shored up on either side by stark emotions; but which is sorry, which is joy?" (153). The reader can see that both of these characters are struggling with intense emotions regarding the death of their friend. However, Rhoda's voice, the last one of the section, does not offer much, if any, in regards to mourning for Percival. Instead, Rhoda is finding herself more and more lonesome and afraid at the very thought of death:

There is a puddle," said Rhoda, "and I cannot cross it. I hear the rush of the great grindstone within an inch of my head. Its wind roars in my face. All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors forever. What, then, can I touch? What brick? What stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely? [... ] Now I will at last be free the checked, the jerked-back desire to be

spent, to be consumed. We will gallop together over desert hills where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets, my offering to Percival (158-164).

In these passages, Rhoda is cementing further the idea that she has nobody to count on, nobody who really cares, leading to her loss of faith in humanity and feeling of emotion. The overarching imagery of despair and loneliness in this section demonstrates Rhoda's feeling that life is fruitless and empty. She is being bombarded with wind roaring in her face, a grindstone rushing past her head, and yet she is unable to find anything sturdy with which she can ground herself. Rhoda is vanishing into her own loneliness as she dwells on what Percival's death might mean to her.

While this section does end on what might sound like a positive note as Rhoda is free of the "desire to be spent, to be consumed" and she is giving an offering to Percival, there is still some powerful and dangerous imagery in this last sentence. Rhoda speaks of throwing her violets into the dashing waves flinging their white foam all the way to the ends of the earth. These intense descriptions work against Rhoda's earlier statements of feeling more in control and the togetherness of the image in which she is riding with others "over desert hills." The reader is once again pulled into a feeling of loneliness and fear, paralleled with an idea from earlier in the novel that Rhoda has a sense that the world is "continuing without us" (Woolf 122). Even though she uses the word "us" in this statement, meaning the entire group, she then goes on to point out that she is the one who is always ignored and forgotten. She notices that she has no impact on the scenes

surrounding her. Even when the reader is given a morsel of hope for Rhoda's acceptance into society or into the small group of friends, it is quickly and violently dashed like the violets into the white foamy waves.

Rhoda's feeling of not belonging to society is worsened by the sense of not belonging to her own body—a symptom known as disembodiment often attributed to melancholia. In his book *All That Summer She Was Mad*, Stephen Trombley describes disembodiment as lacking “a secure sense of her body as the vehicle by which her true self may be inserted into the world” (48). Rhoda does not feel fixed in her body during the majority of the novel and she feels a separation from her corporeal self, just as she continues to separate herself from the physical world. Trombley's discussion of disembodiment gives the reader an explanation as to why Rhoda might be feeling this way. He says that Rhoda “puts herself out to sea” and identifies with the waves “in an effort to avoid the unpleasant interpersonal collisions for which she is not prepared” (48). In saying that Rhoda is not prepared for these collisions, Trombley gives insight into how disconnected she has become in that she does not know how to handle even the slightest personal interactions.

Rhoda also suffers from another symptom that is attributed to melancholia, sleeplessness. While sleeping, Rhoda's feeling of nothingness becomes more overwhelming than any other instance in the novel. Darkness makes everything lose substance as shown in the descriptive writing between chapters illustrating the rotation of the sun. The setting of the sun is described “as if there were waves of darkness in the air, darkness moved on, covering houses, hills, trees, as waves of water wash round the sides of some sunken ship” (Woolf 237). For someone like Rhoda, who has trouble seeing

herself as substantial, even in the light, this poses an issue. At night she lies in bed and worries about falling away into nothingness (27). As the darkness covers all that surrounds Rhoda she begins to lose herself. The world becomes something similar to a black hole as she lies in bed and can find nothing physically real to hold onto and save herself from the endless void of darkness and loneliness. Disembodiment also comes back into play during this scene; as Rhoda lies down she feels as if she has been “divorced from her body” (Trombley 48). She feels as though she is dematerializing through sleep and “falling through her sheet out of the world” (Maze 128). Again, reality is unperceived as Rhoda feels like she is no longer in the world of the living or even attached to her own body.

Rhoda also faces other challenges that give insight into her troubled mind. One of the male members of Rhoda’s group, Neville, says “But then Rhoda, or it may be Louis, some fasting and anguished spirit, passes through and out again” (Woolf 197). In this statement Neville is admitting that Rhoda has an anguished spirit, along with Louis. However, Neville never shows friendly attitude towards Rhoda; he does not try to help her ease her troubled mind even though, as he admits here, he knows that she is suffering. Rhoda’s “anguished spirit” is paralleled by her inability to understand certain basic concepts and maintain concentration, both symptoms of melancholia according to the NLM. When she is in the schoolroom as a child trying to solve the mathematical problem that her teacher has written she finds herself distracted by the looks and sound of everything around her. She is especially distracted by the shutting and opening of doors and the ticking of the clock. She then finds herself getting lost in the loops of the numbers on the board, but the numbers are not numbers to her, they are figures (Woolf 21). She

identifies these figures as the world and herself as being an outside figure (Balossi 141). Rhoda sees herself as detached from all that is around her.

The reasoning for Rhoda detaching herself from the world stems from the ways in which women with mental illness were viewed during this time period. The fact that women were thought to inherently suffer from melancholic symptoms, along with other groups who were persecuted for being different, made it so that symptoms were not taken seriously. The alternative choices for women were to stay quiet and keep to themselves or to be diagnosed and treated. Many women were prescribed treatments that injured them. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the main character is described as having “a temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency” (Gilman 30). She is sent to live in a house in the country, where the room that she is being kept in has barred windows and revolting, garish wallpaper (30-32). Her caretakers tell her not to write, an activity that she loves, because it is thought that writing will continuously trouble her nerves (30). In the end, she only becomes insane, the exact opposite of what was expected (50). These suffering women would be separated from all interests deemed “unhealthy,” or abnormal, and kept in solitary confinement.

In both Woolf’s novel and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, treatment caused more harm than not. Woolf was banned from reading and writing by her doctors and sent to Cambridge to live with her aunt, Caroline Emilia. It was thought, by her doctor, that this would help ease her mental malady (Trombley 80). However, she became more sick during her stay in Cambridge, and only improved upon moving back to London. The similarities between Gilman’s fiction and Woolf’s life reveal that women have constantly been wrongly treated when it came to deviations of the mind. In the end, women had two

choices when they felt afflicted with a malady such as melancholia, either be ignored or sent to a home where they would be alone and stripped of everything that they love. This could serve as an explanation as to why Rhoda never speaks of her illness or seeks medical treatment. She has chosen the less harmful option by keeping quiet about her illness.

## **SEPTIMUS**

Virginia Woolf's works, according to critic E.F. Shields, are a way to "find meaningful values by which to live" (80). *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's second novel, deals with a character who is past his youth and trying to understand the changing values of the world. Septimus Warren Smith, just coming back from war, has witnessed drastic events that have changed him forever. Finding that he does not appreciate human nature after these atrocities, Septimus is no longer able to interact in a socially acceptable manner. In order to truly understand gender in the world of psychiatric medicine in the 1920s, it is important to analyze Septimus' changing character and the treatment that he received from his family, friends, and doctors. He suffers from a disease that was visibly recognized during the early twentieth century called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, also known as shell shock. Septimus returns home from war with this disease as a result of the trauma that he has witnessed. It cannot be ignored that the symptoms of Septimus' PTSD are strikingly similar to those that Rhoda faces in *The Waves*, including avoidance and intrusive thoughts. This becomes very important when discussing the stark differences in the amount of attention which both characters received from the medical community and from society.

Due to the lack of knowledge about mental illness during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many shell-shocked men received inadequate treatment. As already stated, it was

regularly assumed that women were “hysterical” or that they were overly emotional when there was evidence of mental deviation. Those who were on the outside of society, women, Jews, and Slavs, were seen as the groups who would regularly contract melancholia or any disorder of the mind more often (Reid 10). Shell shock was originally associated with weak nerves; there was a parallel drawn between shell shock and “the usual feminine outbursts of hysteria.” In fact, doctors had even adapted the therapies created for hysteria to treat shell shock (Thomas 50). These negative pre-existing attitudes towards “weak nerves” led to mental illness often being attributed to masculinity in crisis (Reid 9). This is perfectly shown through a particular scene in *Mrs. Dalloway* in which Rezia, Septimus’ wife, comments on the ever-increasing sensitivity of his moods. Towards the end of the novel, the effects of Septimus’ illness become more apparent to the outside world. He begins to cry openly and this, to Rezia, is “the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying” (Woolf 141). Septimus no longer acts in the way society expects a man to behave; he has been emasculated by his mental state.

Even through these negative perceptions of mental illness, men, and soldiers especially, received more medical attention than women during the early twentieth century. There was a sentiment during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that soldiers deserved respect from those on the home front. People were campaigning during this time period to make sure that wounded veterans occupied a privileged role in society (Reid 8). Septimus, as a veteran of the war, is sent to multiple doctors in order to find a diagnosis that is acceptable to Rezia (Woolf 90). Even within one doctor’s opinion, Septimus received multiple varying treatments: “deliberate insistence on the illegitimacy of nerves



as a symptom of illness, the minimization of sympathy for the patient [...] which tacitly legitimizes the symptoms as illness, and urging the patient to take an interest in things outside himself” (Thomas 54). Even through the existence of these less than helpful treatments, the psychological field was making strides in understanding the ways that war could affect a person’s mental stability. PTSD was an illness that had been given some attention by the medical field prior to the 1920s: “This relatively common human problem [PTSD] has been known for many hundreds of years, although under different names” (qtd in Jones et al. 158). People have always been worried about soldiers and their wellbeing as they come back from combat. Septimus, as a soldier, had people trying to “fix” him, differing greatly from the treatment that Rhoda receives, where not even her friends are worried about her.

One of the first symptoms that becomes strikingly obvious to the reader is Septimus’ inability to feel emotions, mainly that of love. He no longer has any amorous feelings towards his wife, Rezia. In fact, when she takes off her ring for fear of losing it, Septimus automatically thinks that she has ended their relationship: “Their marriage was over, he thought, with agony, with relief. The rope was cut; he mounted; he was free” (Woolf 67). The existence of agony alongside relief displays the overwhelming amount of dissonance that exists in Septimus’ mind during what many would think of as a trifling event. By ending with relief, the reader is left with the idea that Septimus is thankful he no longer has to pretend to feel emotions that he cannot. This loss of feeling is also revealed when, similar to Rhoda’s feelings about Percival, Septimus is not able to show sorrow at the death of his friend and partner in the war, Evans. Evans had been one of Septimus’ closest friends, creating a relationship very much based in companionship and

respect: “It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug. They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other” (86). In the span of two pages after revealing this death, however, Septimus continuously shows indifference in the loss of his dearest friend. He even congratulated himself for “feeling very little and very reasonably” (Woolf 86-87). Septimus’ feelings are similar to Rhoda’s in that neither of them could properly grieve the loss of someone that was supposedly a close friend.

The lack of emotion towards other humans is paralleled by Septimus’ complete lack of interest in the outside world. Like Rhoda, Septimus has trouble attending to his interactions with other people. He easily gets lost in his physical surroundings (Woolf 25). He exhibits negative feelings towards human nature throughout the novel; in fact, he admits that he thinks humans are completely corrupt. He reveals this most evidently in a thought about the act of having children in which he ruminates, “One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that” (89). One can see that Septimus despises the ways that humans act towards each other, understandably so as he has seen much violence and hatred. The fact that humans are so driven by their own desires has become so disgusting to Septimus that he believes these creatures should no longer prolong their existence.

Distrust in human nature plays a significant role in creating Septimus’ feelings of detachment and avoidance. He never wants to be seen by the doctors because, to him, they embody everything that is evil about human nature. His feelings are revealed when Septimus witnesses “human nature, that is Dr. Holmes, enter the room” (Woolf 93). Not trusting human nature, and always expecting the worst, is a very probable reason for

Septimus detaching himself from society and turning towards nature as an escape. He observes life in nature as so much more serene and connected than life among other humans: “And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on a seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement” (22). Septimus actively senses himself as a part of nature and even feels himself moving with the branches of the tree. The serenity of nature calls to him in a way that the chaotic habits of humans never could. Trombley reads this as a moment of disembodiment as Septimus is no longer trapped within himself. Septimus’ self, “instead of being concentrated in and identified with his body, is diffused through the external world” (43). Nothing compares to the way Septimus feels when he is in the park, surrounded by trees and plants. He feels safer and more at peace in this environment than he does in the constant presence of the doctors who are supposedly there to relieve him of his condition.

## **SUICIDE**

Melancholia and PTSD are both diseases in which many patients end their lives in the self-revenge of suicide. The suicides of Rhoda and Septimus have been viewed by critics as positive, as well as negative, acts. Rhoda’s suicide in particular has been read as a stand against patriarchy, against the creation of strict gender roles. The final pages of *The Waves* consist of Bernard discussing where each character is in life, not allowing them the chance to use their own voices and agency. However, Rhoda is able to silence her own voice instead of letting Bernard write her ending (Allen 22). Woolf describes Rhoda’s suicide through Bernard in a language that conveys to the reader that this was a courageous act, as well as possibly being a spur of the moment decision. Bernard describes Rhoda as flying past the friends to the desert (Woolf 266). This statement

describes Rhoda as physically leaving her friends in a quick manner, and could also be seen as a remark regarding Rhoda's soul. If this second viewpoint is to be extrapolated, then it sounds as though Bernard is saying that Rhoda's soul is now freed through death. Flying is a term that makes one think of being rid of all bonds and boundaries. Rhoda's suicide in this description is made out to be a liberating experience.

Woolf uses descriptive imagery to suggest the idea of positivity behind Rhoda's suicide including calling the pillar that she leaps from a "golden thread" (289). Gold is generally thought of as a bright, sometimes sparkling color. Instead of using dark, foreboding colors to describe the surroundings during this pivotal moment, by using gold Woolf is allowing some richness into the experience. The idea of freedom is also inherent in Bernard's revelation of Rhoda's death to the reader. He evokes an image of her, describing her as having "fear in her eyes" (281). Once again, her suicide could be seen as a courageous and freeing act as she is emancipating herself from the fears of society, darkness, and physical touch that are caused by her mental illness. However, Bernard also explains that he wishes he could have stopped Rhoda and persuaded her that those friends who had been torturing her were really her "brothers" and that they cared for her (281). Through Bernard's retrospective soliloquy, Woolf is showing that suicide was Rhoda's only way to gain attention to the fact that something was amiss within herself.

Septimus' suicide could be read as a positive act as well. E.F. Shields states that Septimus dies because he is forced into a situation in which he realizes that something is more important than mere survival (85). This something else is his selfhood. He feels as though if he lets the doctors take care of him, then he will eventually lose himself: "Septimus dies in order to keep intact what he most values; he uses death as a positive

means” (86). He refuses to be caught up in the evils of human nature. Mrs. Dalloway, or Clarissa, the novel’s namesake, also sees Septimus’ suicide as a positive action. She has felt emotions about the world similar to his and she is “glad that he had done it; thrown it away” (Woolf 186). Clarissa questions her own humanity throughout most of *Mrs. Dalloway* and she constantly hopes to be rid of the roles for women created by society.

Septimus’ suicide serves as a “cathartic suicide” to Clarissa; to her, this death serves as a resolution to the psychological problems created by the same oppressive English society faced by Woolf and Rhoda (Shields 80). Clarissa’s other major concern lies in the fact that she feels as if she has made nothing of her life. She loves her parties and attempts to create meaningful relationships throughout the novel, but “without the guide of objective values, Clarissa is forced to evaluate her life in terms of the ideas of her friends and in terms of her own somewhat vague principles. On both accounts, she is bothered by a sense of failure” (81). Clarissa senses that she has done nothing substantial with her life, but that she can now take control if she chooses, just as Septimus has. Woolf also utilizes multiple words in describing Septimus’ suicide that place it in a positive light, such as calling it an act of “defiance” and “an attempt to communicate” (184). He has defied nature’s ability to make him grow old and has not allowed society to mold him. Like Rhoda, through taking his own life, Septimus is attempting to communicate the wrongdoing in his treatment both by society and the medical field. Both of these characters are now free and forcing society to witness their deaths.

Whether or not they are meant to be positive experiences, these suicides were brought on not only by the fact that these characters were mentally ill, but also by the individual treatment, or lack of treatment, that Rhoda and Septimus receive. Septimus

receives too much instruction; he could be compared to a caged animal as his mind is running wild with frantic thoughts in the last scene before his death. He has doctors constantly telling him their differing opinions, such as Doctor Holmes saying that there is nothing wrong with him while Sir William Bradshaw says that he should be sent to a home (Woolf 90 & 97). He considers all of his options for committing suicide as Doctor Holmes is walking up the stairs to see him against his will. Finally, he decides upon the open window (Woolf 149). Being plagued constantly by doctors drives Septimus to setting himself free by committing suicide.

Rhoda, on the other hand, has the opposite experience when it comes to attentiveness by those around her. She is detached from her friends throughout the novel and, in doing so, she distances herself from societal norms as well as from herself. She has more agency and freedom in that, unlike Septimus, she does not have people to constantly watch over her and tell her what actions she should take. Although this could be seen as positive, there are negative consequences as Rhoda faces extreme isolation without anyone to care for her. This is emphasized in the way that she commits suicide. Rhoda takes her own life when she is geographically distanced from society. Her isolation transcends life and death. The circumstances surrounding these two deaths serve to emphasize the contrast in the treatment of these two characters by society and the medical community.

Woolf also suffered from mental illness and ultimately ended her life. On March 28, 1941 Virginia went to the River Ouse in Sussex, crammed the pockets of her dress with large stones, and walked into the water, drowning herself (Kenney 266). Similar to Rhoda, Woolf distanced herself from society when she committed suicide. Thomas

Caramagno compares Woolf and Rhoda by saying that they both felt “naked and vulnerable, stripped of illusions, as empty on the inside as the world seems on the outside” (67). Neither of these women wanted to be near that which had intensified their mental illness. By being separated from society, from the world, neither woman could be talked out of her decision; this was one choice about their lives that they were able to make without the input of others.

While theories on why she committed suicide abound, writers of biographies speak of her distrust of doctors and the valid reasons behind this distrust being a main reason, similar to Septimus. Her family members were dying because of medical incompetence. For example, Virginia’s niece, Angelica Bell, was hit by a car as a child, and her family was told that her case was “hopeless.” In reality the child had only sustained minor injuries and could have probably easily been saved (Trombley 75). In each case of a family member of Woolf’s being sick or hurt, doctors had not given the injured party proper attention or treatment. Woolf describes her first family doctor, David Elphinstone Seton, as a “woolgatherer” (Trombley 77). In saying this, Woolf is calling her doctor lazy. If this is what Woolf meant, then she was accusing her doctor of not caring about obtaining the correct treatment for her family members. This same doctor determines that Woolf’s sister, Vanessa, had to go to a home for treatment of her “nervous symptoms” before even meeting with her (83-84). The fact that they ended up sending Woolf to a home to get well pushed her to dislike doctors even more. She went so far as to write a letter in which she calls Doctor Savage, the man who finally had her admitted into the home, a “pigheaded man” (81). Woolf obviously had issues with the

medical community in her own lifetime, which can be seen through the problems that the characters face in her novels.

Woolf did not have many places where she could go and feel safe discussing her mental illness. In the end, it seemed as though her only choice was the one taken by both Rhoda and Septimus. Caramagno sums up Woolf's decision to commit suicide in one beautiful statement, "there was only one means left to Virginia to unite her discordant selves. In her death she discovered the way to integrate the 'orts, scraps, and fragments'" (60). This reference to fragmentation of the self comes from Woolf's last novel, *Between The Acts*, which was published after her death: "Look at ourselves, ladies and gentlemen! Then at the wall; and ask how's this wall, the great wall, which we call, perhaps, miscall, civilization, to be built by (here the mirrors flicked and flashed) *orts, scraps and fragments like ourselves?*" (Woolf 219). Coming from an anonymous magnified voice, this sentence encompasses the idea that humans are made up of trivial moments, ideas, and actions. The image given by the words "orts, scraps, and fragments" is one of complete discordance. It is as if this voice is saying that no person is ever truly whole. Throughout her own life, Woolf could tell that her own emotional state was not whole; her mind was constantly in a state of discontinuity. The fact that this statement comes from her last novel cannot be ignored, as this could be a final act of disclosing her own struggles with mental illness.

As previously discussed, her diary entries and letters consist of multiple instances in which she regarded herself as mentally unstable. She was facing the same types of personality control as Rhoda in *The Waves* through the symbol that she called "the Angel of the House"—the ever-present, self-sacrificing, charming, and 'pure' phantom of



traditional femininity in Victorian England” (Reyes 89). Woolf did not fit into this mold, and she did not want to. Instead she tries to kill this trope writing, “I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard” (qtd. in Reyes 89). The only way that Woolf could continue to write was to get rid of this hovering ideal. Not only was the Angel of the House fragmenting her identity in society, she also felt her mind going in different directions as she tried to deal with her illness while pouring her soul into her stories. As both Septimus and Rhoda had, Woolf found that the only way she could be free of this fragmentation was to end her life in hopes that in death she would be whole again.

### **WHY MENTAL ILLNESS?**

When first meeting both Rhoda and Septimus, it is obvious that something is amiss as Woolf takes readers into the minds of the mentally ill. In doing so, she is forcing the reader to feel what the characters are feeling, to hear their thoughts, and understand their pain. This pain, of being forgotten, of being smothered, of feeling alone, is one that many people might not understand. However, in writing these works of fiction, especially in the style of stream of consciousness, Woolf is able to be as descriptive as possible in exposing the emotions and actions of her characters. She is also able to be descriptive in the treatment that these characters faced due to their illness. Suffering herself, Woolf experienced firsthand the neglect as well as lack of understanding when it came to treatment. This was especially obvious when comparing genders as Rhoda is neglected while Septimus is constantly observed. Either way, the treatment that these characters were put through negatively impacted their lives, leading them both to commit suicide rather than face another moment in the company of human nature, and so they seem happier when they are away from others.

One of the most colorful quotes from Woolf comes from her letters, “I shall tell you wonderful stories of the lunatics. By the by, they’ve elected me king. There can be no doubt about it” (*Letters*, 491). In reading novels like *The Waves* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, with stream of consciousness forcing the reader into the mind of the mentally ill, people will be more likely to rethink their assumptions about this subject. Although Woolf’s statement may seem humorous, in essence she is also acknowledging her illness and making it less fearful. In the end of both of these novels, readers see other characters reflecting on Rhoda and Septimus’ stories. Clarissa and Bernard realize that there has been a lapse in understanding, awareness, and treatment for their fellow characters. By leaving her novels in this way, Woolf creates empathy for the mentally ill within her readers, hopefully bringing to light within their minds the repercussions that come from negative suppositions and treatments of the mentally ill.

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