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# The Sexual Spectrum of the Androgynous Mind in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

*Sylvia Cutler*

Can human sexuality really be explained through definitions, labels, and constructs? Is the essence of what drives human desire and identity really summed up in one distinction over another? Regarding questions of human sexual experience, Virginia Woolf was perhaps one of the most revolutionary and remarkable thinkers of her time. Woolf turned the pages of sexually repressive, Victorian writing to the unexplored chapter of human experience in the twentieth-century, a groundbreaking foray into the workings of the inner mind and the constant flux of sexual desire. Woolf would determine through her writing that constructions of sexual identity and desire are more fluid than textbook, more wholesome than restrictive. In uncensoring the construction of the body and its experiences in Cixous-like fashion, Woolf proved the necessity of writing the sexual self.

At the first half of the twentieth century, Woolf found herself among the inner circle of what is commonly referred to as the Bloomsbury Group (Goodwin 59), a network of radical twentieth-century artists and intellectuals who developed and collaborated on insights ranging from class struggle

to the economy, philosophy to the visual arts, and—perhaps the most taboo topic of the time—sexuality. This group was well at ease discussing topics of sexuality, many of the members themselves participating in non-monogamous sexual relationships between each other. A current definition of both heterosexual and homosexual behavior would also describe the nature of the sexual experiences many members in the Bloomsbury group enjoyed, Woolf included. Scholars and biographers have often defined Virginia Woolf as a predominantly lesbian bisexual, and it has been suggested that the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her half-brother as a child resulted in a fear of male sexuality (Buchanan 123). The theme of sexual orientation appears often and even unabashedly in Woolf's novels and writing, however, and there can be little doubt that Woolf's experiences with both sexual abuse and the sexual freedom of the Bloomsbury Group impacted the way Woolf experienced her sexual orientation in one way or another.

Woolf uses sexuality as a lens to portray the inner-workings of her characters' thoughts, and it is this fluidity of sexual orientation in Woolf's characters and writing that sets them apart, enabling freer expression of self and more powerful introspection. Androgyny, which combines both masculine and feminine characteristics, plays an important role in Woolf's aesthetic as a writer, particularly in the modes through which her characters find expression. Examining what Woolf calls the "androgynous mind" in her fictional narrative *A Room of One's Own*, the audience gets a sense of the function of sexual fluidity in portraying androgyny in Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Furthermore, Woolf's exploration of varying degrees of sexual orientation in the characters of Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway works to illustrate both the concept and value of the androgynous mind and its capacity to overcome obstacles presented by a patriarchal, masculine mode of writing reality. Addressing the sexual orientation of Woolf's Septimus and Clarissa through the sexual spectrum of experience within the body, I will ultimately evaluate the androgynous mode's indispensability as a tool to overcome a paradigm of phallogentric language—a tool not unlike French feminist Hélène Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*—and its capacity to transcend oppressive definitions of bodily experience, sexuality, and identity.

To more fully understand what is at stake for the characters of Septimus and Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway* in relation to androgynous writing and sexual fluidity, it is crucial to understand Woolf's own definition of androgyny and androgynous writing as defined in *A Room of One's Own*. At the beginning

of chapter six, Woolf's narrator observes two individuals, a young man and a young woman, entering a taxicab together on the street below her window. Woolf says that the scene relieves the mind of "some strain" (100), a strain caused by the effort of distinguishing one sex from the other. When the two sexes enter the same taxicab, this symbolizes what Woolf would call a "unity of mind." In this moment Woolf concludes that there is "no single state of being" (101), that the mind is continually altering its focus and thereby "bringing the world into different perspectives" (101). These different perspectives apply to the mind as well as the body's spectrum of sexuality. I use the term "sexual spectrum" here to describe what contemporary language would label as "sexual fluidity," that is to say, experiencing varying degrees of sexual attraction toward both men and women. I specifically use this concept of a spectrum of sexuality to describe sexual experience because Woolf would ultimately condemn institutionalized definitions of hetero- and homosexuality in an epistemology of sexuality.

Woolf's own distaste for definitions of sexuality, such as homosexuality versus heterosexuality, perhaps results from an observation that casting one side of sexual experience as "other" or unnatural creates a hierarchy of experience through which sexual experience that is not heterosexual is somehow inferior. It is here that Woolf's definition of androgyny presents itself as a solution to hierarchies of understanding. Of the current status of writing, for example, one that stems from an androcentric, masculine tradition, Woolf laments, "All this pitting of sex against sex, of quality against quality; all this claiming of superiority and imputing inferiority, belong to the private-school state of human existence where there are 'sides,' and it is necessary for one side to beat another side" (110). By this definition, one could argue that this pitting of "sides" against each other is reminiscent of defining homosexuality as somehow deviant from the norm. It suggests that in a hierarchy of sexual experience, the "quality" of homosexual epistemology is the "other." Creating definitions of male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, interferes with how reality is experienced. And according to feminist critic Brenda Sue Helt, Woolf largely believes that "women's love for other women is a highly desirable and empowering emotive force common to most women, and not an identifying characteristic of a rare sexual type" (262-263). This notion that love or sexual attraction for a member of the opposite sex does not constitute a "rare sexual type" harnesses the power of deconstructing sexuality. It

reflects the power of fluidity, the idea that there should be no bifurcation in our understanding of sexual epistemology. What one might deem as perversion from the norm of heterosexuality is in reality an androgynous expression of sexuality, one that is not confined by definitions, and to one degree or another is experienced by everybody.

Woolf's concept of writing sexual fluidity into identity is further amplified by Cixous and the theory of *écriture féminine*. Cixous asserts that non-linear, cyclical writing unhindered by social inscriptions of gender and patriarchal modes of language frees individuals to write the true essence of the self. Drawing on Cixous' concept of feminine writing posited in her 1975 essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," it is clear that Woolf's own concept of androgynous writing both demonstrates and complicates the ultimatum of Cixous' essay, one in which she challenges women to write from the experience of their bodies. The theory of Cixous' *écriture féminine* significantly resonates with Woolf's spectrum of experience found in androgynous unity, ultimately demonstrating that Woolf truly was ahead of her time as a feminist thinker. Cixous would also suggest that it is the over-masculinization of human experience, most especially in writing, that has repressed woman's experience and capacity for complete self-actualization. Both Woolf and Cixous recognize that favoring one side more than the other (i.e. masculine or heterosexual experience) limits the capacity of expression, and thereby the creation of a truer, more inclusive epistemology of sexuality. Cixous writes:

Until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine-economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction. (879)

To dismantle a masculine economy of writing, therefore, it is imperative to challenge the traditional with bodily, sexually fluid modes of expression. To write from one's bodily experiences gets at the essential, a significant and emotive force that rejects the mediation of societal constructs of identity.

In this light, Woolf's own fiction as a female writer does the work that Cixous suggests dismantles the locus of repression brought about by a masculine epistemology of human experience. To overrun a

paradigm that has been ruled by a “libidinal” and masculine economy, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* provides readers with a full sexual spectrum in the conceptualization of her characters’ inner experiences, a work that ultimately castrates a phallogocentric center of expression through non-traditional writing. Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* follows the style of *écriture féminine* in her use of stream-of-consciousness as a narrative mode, writing that breaks entirely from the more logical, rigid, “infertile” (Woolf 104), masculine writing and instead draws from the inner experiences of the body and the mind. In Woolf, there seems to be constant crying out for the need of a full spectrum of ideas and a refusal to place limits on experience through institutionalized labels grounded in patriarchal experience, logic, and hierarchically codified language, and this is evident in the ways Septimus and Clarissa find expression in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

*Mrs. Dalloway* also comes as a tragic example of the harm done to individuals when identity and sexual experience are repressed through hierarchal and patriarchal definitions of identity. The character of Septimus lives in a society that represses the experience of sexual orientation through narrowly defined definitions, and it is ultimately through Septimus that Woolf shows the need for a world in which sexual epistemology is defined by spectrum or fluidity rather than definitions that posit sides or “others.” The message is simple: repression of any sexual orientation results in the death of self, which is of course represented by Septimus’ suicide at the end of the novel. But what brings about this repression, or rather, this fear in Septimus to embrace his sexual fluidity? In one flashback into Septimus’ young adult life, Woolf introduces the character of Miss Isabel, a woman he falls in love with that introduces him to Shakespeare and Keats. It is her influence that awakens the poet within him, for he dreams of her, “thinks her beautiful” and believes her “impeccably wise” (Woolf 113). “Was he not like Keats? she asked,” and it is here Woolf alludes to a reference found in *A Room of One’s Own* in which she argues that Keats was an androgynous writer (107). It is telling that Woolf should link the character of Septimus to the androgynous Keats, especially since Septimus fails to embrace the full spectrum of his sexual orientation in a healthy way toward the end of the book. Perhaps here Woolf is hinting at what could have been for Septimus, had he, like Keats, fully embraced an androgynous mode of expression.

The example of Septimus' interest in Miss Pole shows that he does at least *partially* harbor an attraction for women, but this is soon complicated when Septimus leaves to fight in World War I and meets Evans, his officer. Woolf describes this friendship in a highly erotic passage in her portrayal of the following scene:

He developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name. It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearthrug; one worrying a paper screw, snarling, snapping, giving a pinch, now and then, at the old dog's ear; the other lying somnolent, blinking at the fire, raising a paw, turning and growling good-temperedly. They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other. (114-115)

It is worth noting here that the very language of the passages in which Woolf's characters experience sexual fulfillment produce a change in tone, and this is remarkable in Septimus' attraction to Evans. It is clear that there is sexual energy here, heat that emanates from a hearth of friendship and desire. There is also a similar passion in the image that Woolf describes as two animals rough housing together, an image that suggests submission to a natural, carnal passion found within the most natural urges of the human body. Indeed, Septimus' experiences come alive in this recognition of his sexual identity, which is why Woolf's following move is all the more provoking as Septimus recalls Evans' sudden death and the impact it has on him. Woolf writes, "When Evans was killed, just before the armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognizing that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably" (Woolf 115). This passage is almost jolting after coming down from the erotic experience that occurs in the description of the friendship of Septimus and Evans just moments before. Here Septimus is congratulating himself for not mourning his friend and love interest's death, exhibiting pride and even relief in his ability to cut himself off from feeling anything for a man he once loved. But what is producing this reaction, one might ask? It is often suggested that this lack of emotion and cutting off of feeling is a result of shell-shock—which is certainly what Septimus appears to be going through after the war—yet this lack of feeling for a former sexual interest could also be construed to show

Septimus' fear to embrace an androgynous sexuality by nature of an awareness of the inferiority placed upon those who do not possess the "natural" attractions of a patriarchal definition of heterosexuality.

Woolf further complicates Septimus' sexual experiences through the stultifying moment of marriage to Lucretia —perhaps for Septimus an action that cements his sexual experiences into the heteronormative institution of marriage. This contention is felt as Woolf ends the passage with "to Lucrezia, the younger daughter, he became engaged one evening when the panic was on him . . . he could feel nothing" (Woolf 115). Septimus' inability to feel in the context of this passage could be read in two ways. On the one hand, his inability to feel in this moment is compounded by the fact that he has just engaged himself to a woman, an action that troubles him because he is aware of the spectrum of sexual feelings he has felt toward another man. That this duality of attractions can reside within him is startling, and this deadening of feeling after his tying himself to a woman through marriage might feel like an institutionalization of only one side of his sexual orientation, a limitation to the spectrum of erotic desire he has now experienced from male friendship. On the other hand, it could also be read as the deadening one must feel when obligated to perform a societal duty against one's sexual orientation. He can no longer feel because he has not honored his androgynous self, the identity that knows no bounds through the order of patriarchal language—the Keatsian androgyny harbored within. He must subscribe to one sexual epistemology—that of what sexologists would define as heterosexuality—so that he might not be found guilty or condemnable of being "the other." However, by doing so he must experience a small death, and even a continuation of small deaths as he stays within the marriage without honesty about the spectrum of his desires, until finally he reaches the moment of complete self-destruction; he cannot live within the confines of strict sexual definition, and cannot harbor the guilt that this patriarchal language inscribes upon his experience.

Like Septimus, Clarissa similarly demonstrates moments of self-actualized freedom in embracing a sexual orientation that feels natural to her. One of the most poignant scenes of this experience occurs between her best friend, Sally Seton, in a flashback from her days as a young woman at Bourton. Passages with Sally are filled with energy,



magnetism, and at times recklessness. Clarissa recalls the night Sally kisses her as the night her life changed. Woolf writes:

She seemed . . . all light, glowing, like some bird or air ball that has flown in, attached itself for a moment to a bramble. . . . She stood by the fireplace talking, in that beautiful voice which made everything she said sound like a caress. . . . She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! (73)

Here Woolf describes a scene nearly identical to the energy experienced in Septimus' encounter with Evans. There is fire again, suggestive of this energy of desire, of passion. Sally is light and glowing, and the energy in this language shifts the tone of the writing, coloring the scenery in erotic vitality and almost euphoric description. There is also the image of the flowers in an urn, a symbol of fertility, perhaps, and here Sally offers one to Clarissa just before she kisses her on the lips. Nothing is clearer than Clarissa's response, that "the whole world turned upside down," and it is this moment that Clarissa will cherish as she enters into the institutionalized union of heterosexuality through her subsequent marriage to Richard Dalloway. The contrast of the scene with Sally to other mundane thoughts circling the head of Mrs. Dalloway is the perfect embodiment of Woolf's androgynous mode of writing. The vitality felt here suggests that as Clarissa fully embraces these moments of sexual fluidity, there is a feeling of self-actualized joy and harmony in her inner world.

By contrast, what Clarissa does to guard her sexually fluid self is a denial of her true identity in its own right; yet she does not seek to repress it and shame herself from guilt as Septimus does. Rather, she craftily finds a way to enjoy her attraction to women, albeit secretly. In Virginia Woolf scholar Eileen Barrett's "Unmasking Lesbian Passion: The Inverted World of *Mrs. Dalloway*," Barrett argues that Clarissa's subsequent rejection of Peter Walsh's marriage proposal is done to protect herself from a heterosexual life that might cloud her memory of her sexual awakening with Sally. She argues that in Clarissa's choice to marry Richard Dalloway, she avoids the passion and lack of individual privacy that she would have experienced with Peter Walsh, a former love interest (158). It is here that I would contend that in this respect her character is established in direct contrast to Septimus in that she

does not as overtly try to repress her sexuality, but rather, uses a patriarchal institution such as marriage in her favor to allow a surprisingly safe space for her attraction to women. It is this play on the institution of marriage to find sexually fluid fulfillment that harkens back to the advantages Woolf sees in deconstructing heteronormative institutions, and Clarissa's decisions as a character seem to reflect that.

This is, however, another denial of identity in Woolf's advocacy for living in and acknowledging the whole spectrum of one's sexual experience through an androgynous orientation toward reality. For though Clarissa is free to secretly enjoy her attraction to women in private moments of contemplation, unadulterated by a sexless marriage, there develops a scathing hatred for the character of Doris Kilman (her daughter's history tutor and open lesbian) when she observes Kilman's freedom to overtly acknowledge her lesbianism. Many critics have noted that Kilman is Clarissa's alter ego, and it is in this light that critic Kenneth Moon also argues that "Kilman both provokes the fierce hatred from Clarissa and becomes at the same time the externalizing and informing image of what Clarissa detests and fears in herself" (149). Through Kilman and Clarissa's strong, near homophobic reaction toward her, therein lies yet another example from Woolf of the agonizing crisis of identity that arises from sexual repression. In this case then, Clarissa is hardly different from Septimus. She too has chosen marriage as an escape from her true sexual identity, and it is in this neglect that she continues to suffer inwardly and silently, trying frivolously to fill her life with material meaning through parties and praise. Yet it is ultimately the spectrum of her full orientation that she must embrace if she wishes to live a full life, and it is in this regard that Clarissa is still haunted, left forever fatigued, sprawled out on her daybed, hidden away silently in her attic, and constantly wanting from life what she denies herself out of fear. These moments of pent up anger and repression reflect the strain Woolf mentions of limiting one's whole being to sexual labels and hierarchies of sexual orientation. That there is anger toward the individual who openly embraces one side of this sexual dichotomy while she hides under the label of another is a keen example of the complication these labels pose to understanding and embracing the complexity of sexual identity.

Woolf's explorations of sexuality in her writings demonstrate a profound understanding of the complexity of the inner-workings of human nature and the fluidity of sexual orientation. Examining what Woolf calls

the “androgynous mind” in her fictional narrative *A Room of One’s Own*, it is clear that the function of sexual fluidity in portraying androgyny in *Mrs. Dalloway* allows for greater exploration of the spectrum of sexual orientation in the novel’s protagonists. Both characters’ downfalls and suppression of sexuality ultimately work to illustrate the value found in embracing an androgynous reality. It is by shaping the world through the unity of experience rather than the patriarchal positing of the “other” that the capacity to overcome oppressive institutions becomes essential. Sexually fluid experience, or rather, a spectrum of sexual experiences uninhibited by a value system of patriarchal definition, is crucial to overcoming masculine language and androcentric realities. In this light Woolf coincides with the theory of Hélène Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, and it is Woolf who serves as a feminist figure and novelist that encompasses a solution to combat patriarchal language through the experience of the body. It is writing like Woolf’s that needs to permeate the world, indeed, our very understanding of the world and its epistemological complexities. When the value of androgynous experience is recognized as a framework through which harmful, repressive, patriarchal definitions of sexual experience and orientation might be dismantled, the “other” will cease to exist. There will be no more strain, but rather, a compatible and all-encompassing definition of experience that will know no bounds, for men and women alike. Cixous says as much when she states, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (880).

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