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

As a writer, Virginia Woolf was perhaps one of the most revolutionary and remarkable thinkers of her time. Indisputably at the forefront of the concept of the modern novel, Woolf turned the pages of sexually repressive, Victorian writing to the unexplored and uncensored chapter of human experience in the 20th century, indeed, a groundbreaking foray into the workings of the inner mind.

At the first half of the 20th century, Woolf found herself among the inner circle of what is commonly referred to as the Bloomsbury Group (Goodwin 59), a network of radical 20th century artists and intellectuals who developed and collaborated on insights ranging from class struggle to 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 sharing in non-monogamous sexual relationships amongst other group members. A current definition of both heterosexual and homosexual behavior would also describe 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 Woolf’s sexual orientation in one way or another.

Woolf uses sexuality in a profound way 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. Examining what Woolf calls the “androgynous mind” in her fictional narrative *A Room of One’s Own*, I will analyze the function of bisexuality in portraying androgyny in Woolf’s novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. More specifically, I will address how 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. Furthermore, I will discuss the work of French feminist Hélène Cixous and the theory of écriture féminine in relation to Woolf’s own writing. Drawing on Cixous’ concept of feminine writing posited in her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” I will demonstrate how 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. 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 phallocentric language and its capacity as a creative mode 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 language and the bisexual experience, it is crucial to understand Woolf’s own definition of androgyny and androgyrous 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, I would argue, apply to the mind as well as the body’s spectrum of sexuality. I use the term “sexual spectrum” here to describe what a modern-day term would coin as “bisexuality,” that is to say, a man or a woman who experiences sexual attraction toward both men and women. I specifically use this concept of a spectrum of sexuality to describe sexual experience because Woolf, as I will explain later, would ultimately condemn institutionalized definitions of heterosexuality and homosexuality in an epistemology of sexuality. As Brenda Sue Helt suggests, Woolf also disagreed with the sexologists’ theories of sexual inversion, in particular a definition of bisexuality that suggested that women who were attracted to other women were in fact half male (259).

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 less than or inferior. It is here that Woolf’s definition of androgyny finds its focus and 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, i.e., heterosexuality. It suggests that in a hierarchy of sexual experience, the “quality” of homosexual epistemology is the “other,” or rather, is somehow less than. In this light, what Woolf suggests is that in creating definitions of male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, there is now interference in how reality is experienced, indeed, an interference that she earlier describes as a “strain” on the mind. And according to Helt, Virginia 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). Thus, what Woolf posits through her writing of sexual experience is that there is no bifurcation of sexual epistemology. What one might deem as perversion from the norm of heterosexuality is in reality an androgynous expression of sexuality, one that knows no limits, is not confined by definitions, and to one degree or another is experienced by everybody.

The theory of Hélène Cixous’ “écriture féminine” in many ways resonates with Virginia’s spectrum of experience found in androgynous unity, and in that light demonstrates 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 (Cixous 879).

In this light, Woolf’s own fiction as a female writer does exactly the work that Cixous would suggest a woman attempt to do to overcome and dismantle this locus of repression, i.e., the masculine epistemology of human experience. To overrun an epistemology that has been ruled by a “libidinal” and masculine economy, Woolf’s own inclusion of a full sexual spectrum in her characters’ inner experiences works to castrate the phallocentric locus of expression in writing, one that orients itself fully to one side of sexual experience without recognition of the other. Woolf’s own writing also follows the style of écriture féminine in her use of stream-of-consciousness as a narrative mode, a mode of writing that breaks entirely from the more logical, rigid, “infertile” (Woolf, 104), masculine mode of writing and instead draws from the inner experiences of the body and the mind, though I would argue that Woolf would most likely reject Cixous’ argument that one who is a woman must write as woman, man as man. 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 definition from patriarchal experience, logic, and hierarchically codified language.
Mrs. Dalloway comes into play here as a brilliant 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 is a prime example of the harm of living 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 bisexuality? 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 curious 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.

The example of Miss Pole shows that Septimus does harbor an attraction for women on the one side, but this is soon complicated when Septimus leaves to fight in World War I and thereby meets Evans, his officer. Woolf describes this friendship in a highly erotic passage, in which she portrays 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 hearth-
rug; 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' sexual 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 sexual energy 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" (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 used to love. 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.

It is therefore telling when Woolf ends the passage with “to Lucrezia, the younger daughter, he became engaged one evening when the panic was on him—that he could feel nothing” (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 in order 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 his orientation, 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 too 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! (Woolf 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 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.

What she does to guard her sexual orientation is perhaps 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 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 posits 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 (Barrett 158). She is different from Septimus in this regard in that she does not as overtly try to repress her sexuality, but rather, tries to use the institution of marriage in her favor to actually allow her some moments of recognition and remembrance of her attraction for women.

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. Therefore, 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 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 (Moon 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 ultimately 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.

In conclusion, Woolf's explorations of sexuality in her writings demonstrate profound portrayal 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 bisexuality in portraying androgyny in Woolf’s novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* allows for greater exploration and clarification of the varying degrees of sexual orientation in the characters of Septimus Smith and Clarissa Dalloway. Both characters’ downfalls and suppression of sexuality ultimately work to illustrate the value found in embracing an androgynous orientation toward reality. It is by shaping the world through the unity of experience rather than the patriarchal positing of the “other” through androcentric language and writing that the capacity to overcome oppressive institutions that narrow the scope of experience becomes essential. Bisexual experience, or rather, a spectrum of sexual experiences uninhibited by a value system of hierarchal/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 so eloquently 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).
Bibliography


