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Senior Seminar

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Sharma, O.P. "Feminism as aesthetic vision: A study of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*."

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In "Feminism as aesthetic vision: A study of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*," O.P. Sharma examines the roles of women and men in *Mrs. Dalloway*. According to Sharma, the novel reveals that the two sexes do not and cannot truly understand each other. Because of the mechanical and insensitive style by which men carry out their daily activities, women must continually battle, resist, and suffer at the hands of masculinity.

Sharma begins the essay by addressing the role of the woman writer in Woolf's time. In *A Common Reader*, Woolf critically examined the work of ten distinguished women writers, including Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot. By reassessing their works, Sharma says, Woolf was able to develop an awareness of the unusual dilemma women writers faced, and seized the opportunity to take their work into uncharted territories. Woolf was able to assert "the new role of the novelist and of the function of the novel in treating reality in all the flux of life" (62). Instead of writing about outer struggles, Woolf and other feminist writers shifted their focus to the inner processes of the feminine mind.

Woolf put great effort in shaping one woman to be the dominant impulse of *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Sharma cites passages from Woolf's diary to prove that her thoughts and planning for this woman were detailed and thought-through. The product of her work was Clarissa

Dalloway, a creation of what Sharma calls *the full woman*, and “a new peak of feminist achievement in fiction” (63).

Sharma says that women are complex creatures who love beauty and nature and thrive on social interactions. Men, though, do not see the purpose of such things and cannot relate to the joy that they bring to women. Clarissa loves life, its vitality, youth, and beauty, but because she lives in the confines of a male-dominated society, she doubts herself and her womanhood. The resentment of having to meet men’s standards and mold their lives around them leads her to develop a resentment and frigidity towards her husband, says Sharma.

This essay details several instances in *Mrs. Dalloway* where men act as obstacles to and intrusions upon the happiness of women. When Sally and Clarissa kiss on the lips, for example, Peter ignorantly and unapologetically interrupts their moment of passion. Similarly, Septimus infiltrates Lucrezia’s happy family life in Italy and uproots her. Instead of giving her love and happiness, he imprisons her in an agonizing, numbing marriage.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, some men unknowingly diminish the joy in women’s lives. However, there are others, like Dr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes, who represent masculinity at its most grotesque. According to Sharma, these men are calloused; they have mechanical and unfeeling reactions to human life. They descend on the lives of others like vultures and tear at their being. When they do not destroy, as they do Lucrezia, they infiltrate, as with Lady Bruton. She is consumed by preoccupations about politics and wealth, which Sharma deems the infection of masculinity (70). Lady Bruton is subsequently depicted as an anti-woman who breaks down the feminine spirit rather than lifting it up.

In general, the focus of this essay is the negative impact of men in the lives of women in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the longing for feminine freedom. In the midst of complaints against men,

Sharma notes Woolf's idea that there is the capacity for compromise between men and women. Woolf writes, "And there is a dignity in people; a *solitude*; even between husband and wife a *gulf*; and that one must respect, thought Clarissa..."(qtd. in Sharma 68). Like Clarissa, women can maintain the self and hold onto their integrity and exclusiveness as women if they do not allow themselves to assimilate to male thought and domination.