



A socio-psychological analysis of suicide in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway according to Sigmund Freud's theory of depression

Ashwaq Habeeb Shanshool

Department of Mass Media, Imam Alkadhim University College, Iraq

* Corresponding Author: Ashwaq Habeeb Shanshool

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2582-7138

Volume: 05

Issue: 04

July-August 2024

Received: 08-05-2024;

Accepted: 12-06-2024

Page No: 369-373

Abstract

This socio-psychological analysis examines the portrayal of suicide in Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of depression. The study explores the character of Septimus Smith, a war veteran grappling with traumatic experiences, and analyzes the underlying psychological processes and socio-cultural factors that contribute to his suicidal tendencies. Drawing upon Freud's theory of depression, which highlights unresolved grief and loss as key factors in melancholic states, the analysis delves into Septimus's internal struggles, guilt, and disillusionment. It explores how the character's profound sense of loss and the internalization of his grief lead to self-destructive thoughts and behaviors.

The study considers the socio-cultural context of the novel, including societal expectations and norms, and their impact on Septimus's mental well-being. It examines how societal pressures to conform and the stigma surrounding mental health issues exacerbate his psychological distress. By applying Freud's theory to the character of Septimus, the analysis provides a deeper understanding of the socio-psychological factors influencing his suicidal ideation. It underscores the complex interplay between individual psychology, societal influences, and the broader socio-cultural context depicted in the novel.

This socio-psychological analysis contributes to the scholarly discourse on "Mrs. Dalloway" by offering insights into the portrayal of suicide and its underlying psychological mechanisms. It highlights the significance of socio-psychological factors in understanding the complexities of mental health and the impact of societal pressures on individuals' well-being.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud's theory, depression, socio-psychological, suicide, Virginia Woolf, and Mrs. Dalloway

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" explores various themes and psychological states, including the portrayal of suicide. In this socio-psychological analysis, we will examine the concept of suicide in the novel through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of depression. Freud's theory provides insights into the underlying psychological processes and unconscious conflicts that may contribute to suicidal tendencies. By applying Freudian concepts to the character of Septimus Smith and his eventual suicide, we can gain a deeper understanding of the socio-psychological factors at play in Woolf's work.

Sigmund Freud's theory of depression, as outlined in his seminal work "Mourning and Melancholia," posits that depression arises from unresolved grief and loss. Freud suggests that when individuals experience significant losses, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of an ideal, they may internalize their feelings of grief and direct them inward, resulting in a melancholic state. This internalization can lead to self-destructive tendencies, including suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

In "Mrs. Dalloway," Septimus Smith, a war veteran, grapples with the traumatic experiences he endured during World War I. His psychological state is characterized by a profound sense of loss, guilt, and disillusionment. Applying Freud's theory to Septimus, we can explore the unconscious conflicts and mechanisms that contribute to his suicidal ideation.

This socio-psychological analysis aims to shed light on the complex interplay between Septimus's internal struggles, societal expectations, and the broader socio-cultural context presented in the novel. By examining the character of Septimus through Freud's theory of depression, we can gain deeper insights into the psychological motivations behind his suicidal tendencies and the societal factors that influence his mental state.

By delving into the socio-psychological aspects of suicide in "Mrs. Dalloway," we can appreciate the depth and complexity of Woolf's exploration of mental health, societal pressures, and the human psyche. This analysis offers a deeper understanding of the novel's themes and the portrayal of suicide, underscoring the significance of socio-psychological factors in the characters' experiences and the broader context of the work.

Definition of Suicide

English literature during all its periods has included suicide. It is said that artists and novelists have presented the concept of death instinct in their works more than clinicians have done; and A. Alvarez states that "the more technical research I read, the more convinced I became that the best I could do would be to look at suicide from the perspective of literature ... Literature ... is a discipline which is concerned, above everything else, with ... 'this business of living.' Since the artist ... would offer illuminations which sociologists, psychiatrists and statisticians missed" (Alvarez, p. 13).

Suicide is defined as "the human act of self-inflicted, self-intentioned cessation." (Edwin, p. 385). It is not only done intentionally but also "voluntarily." (The New Encyclopedia Britannica). Moreover, suicide is "uncoerced self-killing in which conditions causing death are self-arranged". These statements imply that the person takes his life with a serious intention and the act of suicide is carried out by the suicide alone with no assistance. Death in suicide is a goal before its being a result. In other words, it is not accidental, rather, it is sought willingly.

Emile Durkheim says that the "term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result" (Durkheim, p. 44). To him, the suicidal's intention cannot be in all the cases the criteria of the self-harming act, rather, it is his knowledge and certainty that his act is fatal, thus, the scholar who dies from excessive devotion to study, the man who takes no care of health or that who toys with death recklessly are not suicides even if their actions end their lives (Ibid., cf. pp. 45, 46).

Another case of the suicidal acts needs shedding light on. It is the "attempted suicide" which is a suicidal act in which death is sought but does not take place (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, s.v. "Suicid"). That is to say, an attempted suicide is an unsuccessful suicide or incomplete suicide for it is only chance, or the suicidal's failure in his performance or in his estimation of the lethality of the suicidal act, which prevents death from taking place. Yet, this case for some professionals, like E. Stengel and Nancy Cook, refers to the suicide in which the person gambles with life, that is, he

consciously or sub-consciously hopes his attempt either would succeed, or it would improve his life if it failed (Ibid). So that unsuccessful suicides in the present study are to be examined when the intention of a fatal act is probable in an attempt to trace the motives behind the self-destructive act.

Suicide in Mrs. Dalloway

The introduction to Septimus Warren Smith is made by the author when he and his wife Rezia are on their way to Sir William Bradshaw, the Harley Street psychiatrist. This introduction comes exactly to display Septimus's fear of the sound of the backfiring motor car. He is frozen with terror as if he is "rooted to the pavement;" (Woolf, 1976, p. 14) ^[11] and he is angry at his wife for asking him to cross the street. It is the memory of war that horrifies Septimus. From the very beginning the author sets the reference to war as a basic one in the novel. The Great War is over, yet, its memory persists. Septimus, the young soldier, is one of the characters shown in the literature of the twentieth century which offers reflections of the efforts made by those on whom memories of the war weighed most painfully to continue living in superficially relaxed post-war London, as they could not forget these memories.

Obviously, Septimus's mind is disturbed; and his illness is behind his suicide. Many critics refer to him as a victim of shell-shock (Dick, 1983, p. 39). Whereas, Woolf's husband and close friends declare her periods of manic-depression are quite similar to the episodes experienced by Septimus. None of these views is exclusive of the other. It is undeniable that Septimus's exposure to war causes the trauma which is behind his sudden emotional numbness especially when he witnesses Evans's death and many other deaths. This stressful event causes, in its delayed consequences, the post-traumatic stress disorder through which Septimus is tormented by attacks of fears, flashbacks of the battlefield expressed by the flames in the room of which he repeatedly warns Rezia, sleeplessness, nightmares and intrusive thoughts. This disorder proves to be longstanding, as in Septimus since he follows no treatment, episodes of "depersonalization" may attack the ill from time to time causing feelings of unreality, arousing distress and discomfort (Johnstone and Freeman, 1998, p.504). Woolf's tracing of Septimus's suffering and approach to suicide is piecemeal. In his struggle to check his sense of reality, the remnant of his sanity, he shows consciousness of the deterioration of his perception, of his derealization, that is, the feeling that changes appear to have occurred in the surroundings, the feeling of unfamiliarity. That is why he sometimes needs to check things around him. The author depicts it pathetically: "he began very cautiously, to open his eyes to see whether a gramophone was really there... He must be cautious. He would not go mad" (Woolf, 1988, p. 126). He struggles against madness, against the loss of the sense of reality. Woolf is really, as P. C. Kennedy praises her understanding of mood, "catches its finer implications... the bubble, the spark, the joke, the dread, the come-and-go of the moment on the wing" (Kennedy, 1975, p. 166). His experience of depersonalization increases. Septimus's perception of himself as being changed is declared by him when he says that he is dead, in other words, he also becomes unreal. This is the dangerous stage that Woolf manages to transmit Septimus to skillfully. D. Laing puts this danger simply, pointing out that when a person does not act in reality he himself becomes unreal; he creates a mask which is a very dangerous state if the false self is

extended and what belongs to it becomes unreal and mechanical; this may bring the person to a suicidal way of thinking. Septimus's responses become mechanical because the increased detachment from others – when his wife begins sobbing, he feels embarrassed; while she feels hopeless of getting children and expresses her sadness, he cannot feel sympathy for her unhappiness. As such, he feels her sobbing like “a piston thumping;” (Woolf, p. 81) it has its effect on his nerves rather than on his heart. It is pressing, causing unbearable tension on his brain. To hide his emotional dryness, he drops his head on his hands “with a melodramatic gesture” which he assumes “mechanically and with complete consciousness of insincerity.” (Woolf, p. 81). In other words, it is a mask.

The harm of depersonalization can be touched when it is combined with the feeling of guilt because it will enable the person to take cold-blooded steps to destroy himself. Septimus's depression instigates a profound sense of guilt. When Bradshaw interviews him, Septimus thinks he has committed a crime, yet, he forgets what it is. Rezia assures the doctor that he has done nothing wrong. He reveals this sense of guilt when he contemplates: “the sin for which human nature had condemned him to death; that is he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed.” For this, he considers the doctors “judges” and he receives “their verdicts.” By this, the keys to suicide are at work to urge him to suicide when the feeling of unreality is allied with the delusion of persecution. It is foreshadowing that in the early pages of the novel, while Septimus is going to see a psychiatrist, he says to Rezia: “I will kill myself.” Since Woolf reflects her illness in Septimus's, it seems that when he prophesies his suicide, the author does likewise. The author manages intelligently to show Septimus's suicide as the mentally ill's solution of his intolerable life – not only in showing an impulsive suicidal act but also in showing how things to him cause inescapable uneasiness and pain, since thinking and perception are distorted.

The Holmeses are hateful and fearful to Septimus. Their power on him is repellent to him. Bradshaw's demand that Septimus must take rest in the asylum is irritating; he cries: “must, must, why must? What power had Bradshaw on him? What right has Bradshaw to say ‘must’ to me?” (Woolf, MD, cf. pp. 130). The doctors are embodiments of power that deprive him of freedom and privacy. He asks his wife to burn all his papers for they may make their inspections and know his secrets. Their power is “a question of law” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87) as Bradshaw says. Thus it is oppressive; it is war-like power; their instructions are like the orders of the army-inhumane since it demands coldness of humane emotions. Hence, he will not obey them. Alex Zwerdling views Bradshaw as a symbol of the social system (Alex Zwerdling, 75). Woolf expresses her cynicism against the doctors. She depicts Bradshaw's conduct with his patient as business-like, pompous and cold. His concern with time is bereft of sympathy or caring for his patients. His profession is shown as mere project to gain profits when too many details are given about his car and his clinic. Further, there is a touch of evil dominance in the depiction of the patients in Bradshaw's clinic when the author says that the “naked, defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless received the impress of Sir William's will. He swooped; he devoured. He shut up people” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87) These are implications of attack. The image is of a monster and prey, of wilderness; of the powerful who captures the weak, imprisons him,

suffocates him. Virginia Woolf hates dominance, as she writes in her diary: “more and more I come to loathe any dominance of one over another: any leadership, any imposition of the will.” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87)

John Holloway describes Sir William as “the doctor who drives his shell-shocked patient to suicide.” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87). Similarly, it is mentioned that Virginia Woolf reaches the suicidal end “because no specific treatments were available during her life, the illness can be observed running its radical course.” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87). Thus A. S. Collins touches a strong vein of criticism against the mental specialist. Sir George H. Savage or Sir Maurice Craig is probably the model of the doctors in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Hence, the parallel is made very apparent between the author and Septimus. She suffers from illness, thus, she perceives the need to write about illness. E. M. Forster says that she starts her essay “On Being Ill” by her thesis: “Illness in literature is seldom handled properly.” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87). She perceives the dangers of some illness, like hers, since they threaten life if not by the illness itself directly, it is by the will of the ill himself, by taking his life.

As such, Septimus lives in an obsessive fear of being intruded, controlled, imprisoned by the doctors he contemplates amidst Bradshaw's interview: “But if I confessed? If he communicated? Would they let him off then, Holmes, Bradshaw?” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87). This astronomical fear stirs a profound feeling of helplessness when Dr. Holmes breaks into his bedroom, the solution to him is to kill himself. By this, Woolf enhances her criticism of the doctors by the suicidal act of Septimus she manages to create an insecurity-provoking situation, which sets a risky atmosphere of suicide (Jackson, p. 14). His feeling of fear is a reaction to insecurity. His suicide is an escape from this fear. That is why he envies his wife for her courage; to him she reflects Shakespeare's expression: “Fear no more the heat o'the sun.” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87) He lacks this happiness of being not terrorized.

The issue of power that is tackled through Septimus's illness and then suicide is related to the fact that the entire system is based on power and wealth of one class (Zwerdling, p. 75). This class, which is embodied by the doctors, is shown to have “the governing impulse to turn away from the disturbing depths of feeling, and towards a conventional pleasantness or sentimentality or frivolousness,” (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 87) as Moody puts it. Therefore, Septimus is a threat to this class. His illness and suicide are a violation of the system of repression of emotions. The war is over, thus, those women who have lost their men in it, or men who express their horror or illness or commit suicide, should not be mentioned in their parties. They disturb its pleasantness. Septimus, as Jeremy Hawthorn concludes, cannot fit to his hypocritical society; therefore, he is destroyed (Jeremy, p. 55). He comes from the war bearing his psychic wound, but, it is inhibited in his society to express sympathy or love or fear. It is ironical that the insane is the only one character in the novel who estimates the price people pay during war. That is why Isabel Gamble says: “his is the madness of vital truth” (Isabel, p. 54). Those people of the high class will not let him threaten their impassivity and composure. Since he fails to freeze up his emotions, he should be excluded from society entirely.

Actually, his society is behind his brain's, his emotional system's deterioration, and now shows embarrassment of him, because of his uncontrolled emotions which are incompatible with their superficiality and coldness. Now

Septimus's fear is of being robbed of his heart, his real self since it is the essence of depth in man. By committing suicide, he kills the body, the part they understand, moreover, it will be torn; and preserve his hearty, humane self. In a wonder, the author expresses this thought of Septimus: "had he plunged holding his tressure?" (Woolf, MD, p. 163). This can be explained by referring to the psychotic motive of suicide – the wish of "rebirth," that is, to do away with the "bad me" in order to achieve a new beginning (Jackson, p. 15). In crying "I'll give it to you," (Woolf, MD, p. 132). Septimus means so. It might be a reference given by the author to the soul, especially that she gives a statement, said by Mrs. Dalloway, reflecting on Septimus's suicide, "our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive" (Ibid., p. 135). Through her criticism of the social system, the author ascribes a great deal of influence to the social system in preparing the proper context of suicide. However, she has another reference, though brief, to this factor, precisely, Septimus's family. Septimus leaves home and departs for London when he is a boy. Though the pretext is seeking the city which paves the way to him to be a poet, yet, the author throws a statement in the way, saying: "he ... had left home, a mere boy, because of his mother" (Ibid., p. 76). Nothing is mentioned about his mother except that she is nagging him to wash his hands before meals. Yet, he leaves home without telling his family; he leaves a note behind him telling them. Those remarks imply a charged familial atmosphere. His departure must have its shadow on his life. He complains more than one time that he is alone. The feeling of aloneness springs from the lack of belonging and to feel completely alone and isolated leads to mental disintegration, as Erich Fromm points out (Fromm, p. 15). Leaving home, Septimus, no doubt, feels alone in London; his one-sided love for Miss Pole implies the need for the lost love of the mother; in the war, he loses his closest companion; his wife has no comprehension of what goes on in his mind; finally, his doctors demand a complete endless isolation in the asylum. By this the author completes the social picture of Septimus's suicide and makes it work hand in hand with the psychological one.

Since Septimus is psychotic, then his suicide is egotic. Virginia Woolf's suicide is also egotic, as E. D. Shneidman states, adding that in such a suicide the act is the outcome of a dialogue within the self so as to detach the person from dialogue with the outside; the person's torment is within the head. The danger of this dialogue appears destructive when voices demanding killing the self are heard. This suicide is also called miscellaneous type (Jackson, p. 13). Septimus experiences this destructive danger many times till he surrenders at the moment of the act. These voices sometimes he interprets as Evans's. It is noteworthy to draw another motive of Septimus's suicide, that is, "reunion," for his longing to be with the dead is referred to in the novel several times.

On the other hand, the suicide is anomic. An anomic suicide occurs when a sudden disruption in the individual's adjustment to society takes place. Septimus shows affiliation to society when he volunteers to join the army. Conversely, when the war ends, he loathes all humanity because of his loathing to society. He falls in a painful moral alienation when he cannot relate himself to the prevailing atmosphere. The wish to die is behind Septimus's suicide since it is aroused by fear, fatigue, illness, pain, and hopelessness

(Farberow and Shneidman, p. 112).

By Septimus's suicide, Virginia Woolf succeeds in her reflection of the personal pains alongside with universal ones when she attaches it to psychoses, war, and the social system. Her means in this success is the technique of stream of consciousness. She, as Henry James points out, enters the mind and follows its movements (Randall, 1986, p. 12). In depicting the suicidal character, she achieves a literary triumph and an intellectual triumph as well. She says, in her essay "Character and Fiction," "most novelists have the same experience. Some Brown, Smith, or Jones comes before them and says in the most seductive and charming way in the world, 'Come and catch me if you can.'" (Woolf, MD, cf. p. 420) If the character of Septimus Smith challenges her, she in fact wins the challenge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a socio-psychological analysis of suicide in Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of depression provides valuable insights into the complex interplay of social and psychological factors contributing to the character's decision to take her own life. Since suicide is a strange, complex, and sometimes ambiguous act it has been studied recently through multi-disciplinary approaches in order to grasp all its facets simultaneously; that is, by including psychology, social science, culture, biology.

Virginia Woolf's depiction of the character Septimus Smith, a war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, offers a nuanced exploration of the psychological state leading to suicidal tendencies. Septimus's experiences of war trauma, isolation, and societal pressures contribute to his deep sense of despair and alienation. Freud's theory of depression helps shed light on the underlying psychological processes at play, emphasizing the role of unconscious conflicts, repressed desires, and unresolved psychological issues. According to Freud's theory, depression can stem from unresolved conflicts and the inability to reconcile one's desires and societal expectations. Septimus's war trauma and subsequent psychological distress create a dissonance between his experiences and the societal norms that dictate his behavior. This conflict, coupled with repressed desires and a sense of being trapped in a hostile world, leads to a profound sense of hopelessness and ultimately, thoughts of suicide.

Woolf's novel also highlights the socio-cultural context of the post-World War I era, where societal expectations placed burdens on individuals to conform, particularly in terms of gender roles and mental health stigma. Septimus's inability to fit into these societal molds further exacerbates his psychological distress and intensifies his feelings of isolation. By incorporating Freud's theory of depression into the socio-psychological analysis, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex factors that contribute to Septimus's suicidal tendencies. Woolf's exploration of Septimus's psyche and his interactions with society provide a rich tapestry of socio-psychological dynamics, highlighting the importance of considering both individual and societal factors in understanding suicidal behavior.

Overall, the socio-psychological analysis of suicide in "Mrs. Dalloway" through Freud's theory of depression underscores the intricate relationship between individual psychology, societal expectations, and the experience of depression. It emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to mental

health, taking into account both the internal psychological processes and the external social influences that shape individuals' experiences and decisions.

References

1. Alvarez A. *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd; 1971.
2. Don D Jackson. *Theories of Suicide, Clues to Suicide*, eds. Edwin S. Shneidman and Norman L. Farberow, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc.; 1957.
3. Edwin S Shneidman. *Suicide: Psychological Aspect*, International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences.
4. Fromm Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Fawcett Crest; 1973.
5. Isabel Gamble. *Clarissa Dalloway's 'Double', Critics on Virginia Woolf: Readings in Literary Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline E. M. Latham, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.; 1970.
6. Jeremy Hawthorn, *Multiple Personality and the Disintegration of Literary Character*, London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd.; 1983.
7. Randall Stevenson, *The British Novel Since the Thirties: An Introduction*, London: B. T. Bastford Ltd.; 1986.
8. Shneidman, Edwin S. and Norman L. Farberow, eds. *Clues to Suicide*. New York: McGraw-Hill book Company, Inc.; 1957.
9. The Macmillan Encyclopedia; 2001, s.v. "Suicide" (Xrefer. URL: <http://www.xrefer.com/entry/563638>) September 12, 2023.
10. The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Fifteenth Edition, s.v. "Suicide"; 1985.
11. Virginia Woolf. *Mrs. Dalloway* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd. All citations from the novel are from this edition. Hereafter referred to as MD; 1976.
12. Zwerdling Alex. *Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System*. PMLA; 1977;92(1).