



Clothing as Conformity and Concealment: Social Division in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs.*

Dalloway

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* employs clothing as a potent symbol to highlight and analyze psychological issues and social divisions in post-World War I London. It contends that the characters' class status, emotional frailties, and social pressures are all reflected in the novel's clothing, which serves as both a form of social conformity and a means of concealment. While Miss Kilman's simple coat represents social exclusion and poverty, Clarissa Dalloway's elegant dress represents her upper-class identity and controlled public persona. Woolf emphasizes how clothing creates emotional isolation, enforces social boundaries, and highlights the characters' internal conflicts through intricate storytelling and symbolism. The study comes to the conclusion that Woolf's depiction of clothing highlights the negative consequences of putting appearance before authenticity, revealing the spiritual emptiness and fragmentation brought on by strict class and patriarchal norms.

**Introduction:**

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf deftly examines how appearance, social identity, and psychological depth relate to one another in post-World War I London. Dress and costume stand out among the novel's numerous themes as potent symbols that Woolf uses to criticize the shallow ideals and social structures of her era. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, clothing serves as more than just ornamentation; it allows characters to project respectability and class, hide vulnerability, or express conformity. Clarissa Dalloway's meticulous attention to appearance and social presentation is a reflection of the larger pressures imposed by a patriarchal and class-bound society, where emotional repression and inner fragmentation are frequently hidden behind outward decorum. The novel reveals how this focus on attire alienates people from genuine self-expression while reinforcing the appearance of stability and control. Woolf illustrates the detrimental effects of prioritizing appearance over authenticity through her nuanced psychological narration, demonstrating how the obsession with outward forms eventually results in spiritual emptiness, loneliness, and a brittle sense of identity.

Dress and attire serve as indicators of class, status, and individual identity in *Mrs. Dalloway*'s society. Characters use clothing as a major means of self-expression, but it also draws attention to significant social divides.

Using Clothes as a Social Marker:

In the book, social class is closely related to clothing. Clarissa Dalloway's sophisticated evening attire, particularly her "mermaid-green" dress, perfectly captures her upper-class standing and her function as a society hostess. Her self-reliance and dedication to upholding her position are demonstrated by her attention to detail and her ability to fix her own dress. The value placed on shoes and gloves is an obvious indication of upper-class customs, which the younger generation starts to reject, indicating shifting social dynamics.

Separation and Exclusion:

Characters' attire frequently reveals or hides social boundaries. Miss Kilman's inexpensive green mackintosh distinguishes her from Clarissa and the stylish elite, indicating her outsider status and poverty. The description of the "fine ladies and gentlemen" at the party as "idle, chattering, and overdressed" reinforces their privilege while marginalizing those dressed simply and casually.

*Expression and Identity:*

Clothes are a way for female characters to negotiate their identity and agency. Woolf employs color and style to convey feelings and interpersonal connections; for example, Miss Kilman's coat symbolizes exclusion and loneliness, while Clarissa's dress represents self-assurance and public persona. Mrs. Dalloway's wardrobe choices highlight how appearance influences social roles by uniting and dividing characters.

Virginia Woolf's criticism of Edwardian society's emphasis on class and appearance is reflected in Mrs. Dalloway, where each character's wardrobe choice is a direct commentary on their social status and inner lives.

The Social Significance of Clothes:

Clarissa Dalloway's mermaid-green gown is a representation of social success and upper-class grace. Her personal attachment to the dress and her choice to fix it herself show how she intentionally crafted her public persona, fusing her role as hostess with her body and mind. Additionally, the dress conveys her vulnerability by directly depicting emotional moments and demonstrating the extent to which her identity is bound up in appearance. The

In sharp contrast to Clarissa's outfit, Miss Kilman's green mackintosh coat symbolizes social exclusion and poverty. Her "closed off" lifestyle is reinforced by the utilitarian, shapeless garment, which identifies her as an outsider and illustrates her economic and emotional alienation as she protects herself from attention and warmth.

Richard Dalloway's white waistcoat is a symbol of social superiority and wealth. Male privilege and the social expectations of respectability and authority within their class structure are demonstrated by the choice of a spotless, formal item.

Ellie Henderson's modest clothing conveys a lack of agency within the elite social sphere and a lower social status. At Clarissa's party, her unassuming attire visually reinforces her marginalization and precarious position.

Identity and Clothes:

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, costumes serve as a vehicle for social and psychological commentary rather than just being decorative. Every item of clothing reveals the wearer's connection to power, status, and



genuineness. Woolf emphasizes the novel's themes of social anxiety, isolation, and the constraints imposed by rigid class structures by using clothing to highlight the gap between one's private and public selves.

Clothing is more than just fabric in Mrs. Dalloway; it represents the intricate, frequently unbridgeable divisions that make up society, reflecting identity, hierarchy, and attitudes toward change.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, social division based on class and attire causes long-term suffering and emotional distress for those who are left out or marginalized. Throughout the book, these detrimental effects are subtle but profound.

Social and Emotional Isolation:

Characters like Miss Kilman suffer because their attire identifies them as outsiders, which feeds resentment and feelings of inferiority. The emotional cost of class barriers is highlighted by the contrast between Clarissa's elegance and her shabby coat, which heightens feelings of moral distress and persecution.

Working-class war veteran Septimus Warren Smith suffers from severe mental distress and social neglect, which is made worse by his inability to blend in with Clarissa's affluent society. His terrible suicide, which was influenced by the oppressive divisions of status and conformity, is the result of his suffering.

Relationship Obstacles:

Characters become estranged due to clothing differences based on class. The unwritten hierarchies that impede real connection and perpetuate loneliness for those beneath Clarissa are highlighted by her courteous distance from her servants and her reluctance to invite her impoverished cousin Elsie to her party. Women like Rezia, Septimus's wife, struggle not only with caregiving but also with isolation and a lack of social support, facing dismissal from the upper circles due to her attire and class.

Loss of Agency and Oppression

Miss Kilman and Clarissa are both burdened by social expectations. Clarissa feels severely constrained and doubts her own decisions, exposing pain beneath her elegant exterior, even as she upholds conventions to preserve her status. Characters like Sir William Bradshaw and Miss Kilman



enforce these divisions, contributing to the suffering of those who refuse or are unable to conform. The novel portrays oppression as a persistent threat, whether through religion, science, or strict convention. Mrs. Dalloway's characters' suffering and marginalization demonstrate how social divisions based on attire have detrimental effects on people's identities and mental health.

Conclusion:

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf eloquently illustrates how, in post-war London, clothing and costumes serve as crucial markers of social identity, class distinction, and psychological states. The novel illustrates the oppressive nature of a patriarchal and class-conscious society by showing how clothing serves as a tool for social boundary enforcement as well as a means of self-expression. Clarissa Dalloway's sophisticated clothing conceals her emotional vulnerability while reflecting her upper-class status and her effort to control her public persona. Miss Kilman's simple coat and the modest attire of other characters, on the other hand, emphasize social marginalization and exclusion. The profound emotional and psychological consequences of adhering to strict class norms, such as alienation, loss of agency, and internal disintegration, are revealed by these fashion differences. Woolf's subtle use of clothing symbolism highlights the negative effects of prioritizing conformity and appearance over authenticity and uniqueness, ultimately depicting a society rife with spiritual emptiness and loneliness.

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