Letter to the Editor

AN EXAMPLE AS TO THE ROLE OF LITERARY WORKS IN PSYCHIATRY TRAINING:
DETAIL FROM MRS. DALLOWAY—SEPTIMUS WARREN SMITH, SHRAPNEL, AND SCHIZOPHRENIA

Literary works can be a valuable tool for helping students of psychiatry to improve their understanding of mental health and mental disorders. Reading and analyzing literary works that fully describe the human condition can help psychiatry residents move beyond descriptive psychiatry and consider the philosophical, cultural, and social dimensions of human existence. Below is a study that I hope provides a valid example.

When I first read Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs. Dalloway I was in my final year of medical school. It was quite hard for me to get into the book, which was admirably translated into Turkish by Tomris Uyar and published by Birikim. Who knows how many times I reread the first sentence, which has stuck with me ever since, “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (Woolf 1925, 1992). The second time I read the book was during my final year as a psychiatry resident. In the present study I made use of the notes I took at that time. The notes begin, “Septimus is a schizophrenia patient. Mrs. Dalloway, who identifies with him and his suicide, is neurotic and depressive. Septimus kills himself. Okay, but were the System and the established medical approach entirely blameless? As a healthcare professional you must never be like Dr. Holmes or the psychiatrist Sir Bradshaw!”

On Mrs. Dalloway

Postwar England; a parenthesis opened on a June morning in 1923 and closed the night of the same day—a slice of time that spans not even a day. A psychosocial “biopsy.” A limpid requiem for the “stepchildren” of postwar England, just as described by Karen Horney in her explanation of her ideas on culture and neurosis: “The person who is likely to become neurotic is one who has experienced the culturally determined difficulties in an accentuated form, (...) and who has consequently been unable to solve them, or has solved them only at great cost to his personality. We might call him a stepchild of our culture” (Horney 1937, 1999).

The novel begins with Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway going downtown in the morning to shop for a party she is going to give that evening and ends the evening of the same day with the party. During this brief span of time, through the relationships Mrs. Dalloway establishes while shopping, at home, and in the street, and through encounters, associations, and memories we are privy to the inner worlds of both Mrs. Dalloway and the many people known and unknown to her. In the crowd of the city people jump at the same sound of a tire bursting and look up with the same amazement at the letters written in smoke by an airplane to advertise toffee. With the same awe they try to guess who is inside the large and luxurious car parked at the curb. They hear the same clock tower striking the half-hour. Who are all these protagonists whose inner worlds we brush by? And, above all else, who is Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway?

Mrs. Dalloway, the middle-aged, neurotic, high-toned lady who is not even Clarissa any more, just Mrs. Richard Dalloway. Mrs. Dalloway with the awful fear in the depths of her heart, the overwhelming feeling of incapacity and existential anxieties; the desire no matter what to be loved by others; her submissions and rebellions; all those others and their
thoughts, by both of which she sets so much store; the dichot-
omies of success, failure, power, weakness; the social activities
in which she immerses herself to numb her anxiety. Her hus-
band; Member of Parliament, the ordinary and good-hearted
Mr. Richard Dalloway. Peter Walsh, her one-time lover, just
back from India, where he moved to years ago, come straight
to see her; the solitary and defeated man unable to con-
form. Mrs. Dalloway’s lovely, smart, and handsome daughter
Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s private teacher, the angry, ugly, strict,
and religious Doris Kilman. Sally Seton, a close friend of Mrs.
Dalloway’s in her youth, whom she hadn’t seen for years and
“hadn’t looked like THAT!” Hugh Whithbread, a friend of
the family and a true representative of the establishment who
holds an ordinary post in the Royal household, but seizes
every opportunity he can. Septimus Warren Smith, whom
Mrs. Dalloway never meets, whose face she has never even
seen; Septimus Warren Smith, who is shell shocked, who has
seen his best friend die before his eyes and now suffers from
severe mental illness (probably schizophrenia). Septimus’ wife
Lucrezia (Rezia), a young and warm-hearted unhappy Italian.
Dr. Holmes, a general practitioner and Septimus’ first doctor,
who does not think he is ill or fails to see it. And Sir William
Bradshaw, to whom Septimus is referred with great hope; the
renowned psychiatrist and diagnostic genius—narcissistic, in-
sensitive, and useless (at least in this case).

Detail from Mrs. Dalloway: Septimus Warren Smith

“… aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown
shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazel eyes which had that
look of apprehension in them which makes complete stran-
gers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where
will it descend?”

“… To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better
sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so,
too, his profile – his angular, big-nosed, intelligent, sensitive
profile; but not his lips altogether, for they were loose; and his
eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely; hazel, large; so that he
was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the
other, might end with a house at Purley and a motor car, or
continue renting apartments in back streets all his life; one
of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is
all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries, read in
the evening after the day’s work, on the advice of well-known
authors consulted by letter.”

“... there he was; still sitting alone on the seat, in his shabby
overcoat, his legs crossed, staring, talking aloud.”

“Rezia, sitting at the table twisting a hat in her hands, watched
him; saw him smiling. He was happy then. But she could not
bear to see him smiling. It was not marriage; it was not being
one’s husband to look strange like that, always to be starting,
laughing, sitting hour after hour silent, or clutching her and
telling her to write. The table drawer was full of those writ-
ings; about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries;
how there is no death. Lately he had become excited suddenly
for no reason, and waved his hands and cried out that he
knew the truth! He knew everything! That man, his friend
who was killed, Evans, had come, he said. He was singing
behind the screen. She wrote it down just as he spoke it. Some
things were very beautiful; others sheer nonsense. And he was
always stopping in the middle, changing his mind; wanting
to add something; hearing something new; listening with his
hand up.

But she heard nothing” (Woolf 1925, 1992).

Septimus was but one of the many millions of young men
called “Smith” “swallowed up” by London, but at the same
time a young man who was “distinguished” from the very
beginning by his parents who gave him the unusual name
“Septimus.” We are first introduced to him when he and his
Italian wife Lucrezia are trying to cross a street in London.
Septimus believes he is the one blocking the way. He believes
he is looked at and pointed at, and that everything happened
in relation to himself and for a specific purpose. He tells his
wife that he can read people’s minds, that he knows how they
would kill themselves. He starts talking aloud suddenly and
stops talking all of a sudden, laughs suddenly for no reason,
cries, gets excited… At times he thinks of himself as the
greatest of mankind: “Look the unseen bade him, the voice
which now communicated with him who was the great-
est of mankind, Septimus, lately taken from life to death,
the Lord who had come to renew society, who lay like a
coverlet, a snow blanket smitten only by the sun, for ever
unwasted, suffering for ever, the scapegoat, the eternal
sufferer…” (Woolf 1925, 1992). At other times he thinks
he has committed appalling crimes, that he is condemned
to death by human nature, and he thinks of killing himself:
“So he was deserted. The whole world was clamouring:
Kill yourself, kill yourself…” (Woolf 1925, 1992). The
sky calls out to him, calls out in a language with unknown
words, words he cannot quite make out: “He waited. He lis-
tened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped
Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on,
drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in
Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another
sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in
Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a
river where the dead walk, how there is no death” (Woolf
1925, 1992). He imagines things, he has illusions and hal-
lucinations: “No crime; love; he repeated, fumbling for his
card and pencil, when a Skye terrier snuffed his trousers
and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a
man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, ter-
rible to see a dog become a man! At once the dog trotted
away” (Woolf 1925, 1992). His senses have grown numb,
blunt, as if his ability to feel has disappeared: “Beautiful!” she would murmur, nudging Septimus, that he might see. But beauty was behind a pane of glass. Even taste had no relish to him. He put down his cup on the little marble table. He looked at people outside; happy they seemed, collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel. In the tea-shop among the tables and the chattering waiters the appalling fear came over him – he could not feel…” (Woolf 1925, 1992).

Let us attempt to make a psychiatric assessment of the situation from an entirely descriptive point of view. S. W. Smith is a 30-year-old male clerk who is not working at this point, and lives in London with his wife. He no longer looks after himself very well and seems to have lost interest in his surroundings. Sometimes he speaks to himself. His speech is incoherent. He has little desire to relate to people. He has a blunt affect. He does not show signs of impaired consciousness or disorientation. In terms of perception he has visual/auditory illusions and hallucinations. His reality testing is impaired. He has blockages in his stream of thoughts. His associations are accelerated, sometimes skipping from one thing to another. His thought content includes delusions of persecution, delusions of influence, delusions of grandeur, delusions of self-accusation, delusions that others can read his mind, and thoughts of guilt and suicide. He exhibits strange and bizarre behaviors. Diagnosis: paranoid schizophrenia.

But what was Septimus’ life/personality like prior to illness? Coming from a poor family he works as a clerk in a small firm in London. He enjoys reading and writing. He likes poetry, reads Shakespeare, and writes poems. He is a romantic and idealist young man. With the outbreak of World War I he volunteers for military service. The war ravages him. He witnesses first hand the death of his best friend and officer, Evans. During a time of intermingled astonishment, pain, and indifference he marries Lucrezia, whom he met in Italy, and settles in London. Welcomed home as a decorated war hero, Septimus soon falls ill.

Let us go back to the novel. Septimus is ill; “very, very ill.” His wife Lucrezia feels pain, confusion, and desperation. The novel also describes with perfect empathy the difficulties of being the relative of a mentally ill person: “It’s wicked; why should I suffer? (…) I can’t stand it any longer, (…) Septimus, who wasn’t Septimus any longer, to say hard, cruel, wicked things, to talk to himself, to talk to a dead man, on the seat over there…” (Woolf 1925, 1992). Lucrezia on the one hand tries to conceal her husband’s unusual behavior from society’s cruel gaze, while on the other hand she tries to help him. First, she asks general practitioner Dr. Holmes for help. Dr. Holmes said, “there was nothing whatever the matter with him”, he is just, “a little out of sorts.” All he can suggest is that he, “take an interest in things outside himself.” Later, Dr. Holmes refers him to London’s renowned psychiatrist, Sir William Bradshaw. Desperate, Lucrezia sees him as a savior and makes a great deal of him. “… she thought his name sounded nice; he would cure Septimus at once”…, but is ultimately disappointed. Dr. Bradshaw makes his diagnosis the moment he sees him: “He could see the first moment they came into the room (the Warren Smiths they were called); he was certain directly he saw the man; it was a case of extreme gravity. It was a case of complete breakdown—complete physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage, he ascertained in two or three minutes (writing answers to questions, murmured discreetly, on a pink card)” (Woolf 1925, 1992).

Dr. Bradshaw tells them that Septimus is very seriously ill and suggests that they place him in a home where he can rest. He also adds that he will visit him once a week—and that is all. Willy-nilly they return home and Septimus kills himself by jumping out the window. The only witness to this scene is Dr. Holmes, who has come to take him to the clinic. Such is the doctor’s ignorance and heedlessness about the illness that his reaction does not even take the form of “Oh dear!”, “Oh no!”, “I’m too late”, or “what a shame”, but instead he cries out, “The coward!”…

Virginia Woolf mercilessly criticizes the doctors of that time. Far from understanding Septimus, they are blunt, shallow individuals. The only function of these insensitive people, who are conformists and view the world from a very narrow perspective, is to attempt to adjust the ‘maladjusted.’ At one end there is Dr. Holmes, who with incredible ignorance overlooks mental illness—ignoring it completely—and remains a spectator in the presence of suffering, and even despises it; at the other end there is Dr. Bradshaw, who describes and diagnoses a severe mental illness, but fails to understand his patient. At first the author’s approach sounds like a precursor of anti-psychiatric thought, but it is not anti-psychiatry. Indeed, Woolf criticizes Dr. Holmes for not understanding the illness and for ignoring it; therefore she does not maintain that ‘there is no such thing as mental illness’ as does anti-psychiatry. In addition, she also criticizes Dr. Bradshaw—who diagnosed the illness and suggested that the patient be institutionalized—for failing to take a holistic approach, for not being humanistic, and for not devoting enough of his time and effort. What better warning could there be toward ignorance and magical thinking on the one hand, and modern medicine and psychiatry on the other? Woolf questions to the limit the problem of “Proportion and Conversion”, i.e. the process of assessment, evaluation, and diagnosis, which is one of the primary obstacles standing in the way of psychiatry today. To tell the truth, she leaves the question open: “Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William’s goddess, was acquired by
Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw, who caught salmon herself and took photographs scarcely to be distinguished from the work of professionals. Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion—his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw’s if they were women (she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son), so that not only did his colleagues respect him, his subordinates fear him, but the friends and relations of his patients felt for him the keenest gratitude for insisting that these prophetic Christs and Christesses, who prophesied the end of the world, or the advent of God, should drink milk in bed, as Sir William ordered; Sir William with his thirty years’ experience of these kinds of cases, and his infallible instinct, this is madness, this sense; in fact, his sense of proportion” (Woolf 1925, 1992). In the debates on culture, psychiatry, diagnosis, and classification, what more can be said to make us aware of the cultural processes of which we are an inseparable part!

The trigger for the emergence of Septimus’ illness and psychosocial trauma was war and losses. The war also symbolizes the dead end confronted by civilization (capitalism). It underscores destruction and lack of communication. Technological change, advertisements, the governing class, and the unemployed are all treated within this context. The ambulance that carries Septimus’ corpse and which Peter Walsh thinks of as, “one of the triumphs of civilisation” when he sees it—the ambulance that, “picked up instantly, humanely, some poor devil” (Woolf, 1925, 1992), seems to be squeezed into the text to mock the “civilization” that sacrifices Septimus. Mrs. Dalloway's neurosis too is a concession made to civilization! Under Septimus’ suicide lies a criticism of the system and of civilization, and under the identification Mrs. Dalloway establishes with Septimus, whom she never meets, a neurotic masochism. If, as Karen Horney posits, the problem of neurotic masochism is not merely satisfaction through suffering, but that the satisfaction the neurotic individual tries to obtain is actually that of getting rid of the self (Horney 1937, 1999), then the aforementioned interpretation is quite understandable. Mrs. Dalloway’s interior monologues also often include the theme of death: “it was very, very dangerous to live even one day”. When Mrs. Dalloway learns, during her party, that Septimus has killed himself, she is first overcome by guilt: “Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered” (Woolf 1925, 1992). This is followed by a feeling of admiration for Septimus, who had done what she couldn’t: “The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away” (Woolf 1925, 1992). The death of Septimus, with whom she identified, rather than that of herself leads to a sort of catharsis: “she had never been so happy.” Here she says what Septimus was thinking as he was killing himself. She expresses the failure to be understood and the discord between life and herself. The admiration Mrs. Dalloway shows for Septimus and his death is not necrophilia or praise of suicide; in order to preserve the things in her everyday life that drown in idle chatter, that are wasted by the lying order of things, effaced, degenerate with each passing day, she needs to concretize one way or another her rebellion and resistance.

The word Septimus has two related entries in dictionaries. The first is a fencing term (septime), meaning the seventh and last position from which a parry can be made by a fencer; in other words, the final scene of the duel fought against “civilisation”! The other is the Roman Emperor, Septimius Severus, who led quite a colorful life. History books write that he exclaimed, “I have been everything and everything is nothing”, that he survived a pointless war, but was laid low by sickness, and that his wife Julia, with her moderate attitude corrected his “follies”.

Now, at the turn of the twenty-first century “civilization” is on the job. Innocent people were killed in the twin towers and are still being killed in Afghanistan; people are ill-treated. “Civilization” drops food aid packages on Iraq, but also bombs—a situation that is just as tragicomic as the ambulance passing through the middle of the novel. And we just stand and watch. And the more we watch the more neurotic we get. “With all this going on” we should be able to do more in the name of life!

REFERENCES
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