To a society that values emotional restraint above everything else, Septimus, in his severely traumatized state, responds with rapturous visions of “universal love.” Dr. Holmes, however, remains unsympathetic and interprets even Septimus’s suicide as an un-English, unmanly sign of weakness: “The coward!” (164).

What *Mrs. Dalloway* shows is that a society’s demand for emotional control or moderation can itself become excessive: that an unconditional requirement for self-restraint is in fact a form of moral extremism.²¹

**History as the Return of the Repressed**

Just as it is instructive to examine Septimus’s ‘failure’ to comply with upper-class ideals of stoic composure, it is worth asking why Clarissa herself is unable to maintain her equanimity when confronted with Doris Kilman, the tutor and close friend of her daughter Elizabeth. The intensity of Clarissa’s dislike for Miss Kilman is in fact quite startling:

> Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat. Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired; she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be […].

> It rasped [Clarissa …], to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! […] this hatred, which, especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine […], and made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots, as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love! this hatred! (12–13)

The “hatred” Clarissa feels for Doris Kilman endangers, we learn, even her pleasure in “making her home delightful” – and it certainly departs from an ideal of emotional equipoise. The text makes clear, moreover, that Clarissa does not hate Miss Kilman because she objects to the idea of her daughter falling in love with someone of her own sex; rather, Elizabeth’s blunder is that she has fallen for a “[h]eavy, ugly, commonplace” woman (137), quite unlike Clarissa herself, who had had the good sense of pining after the fascinating and more socially acceptable Sally Seton. Moreover, when we learn that Clarissa disdains Miss Kilman’s piety because of her conviction that “religious ecstasy made people

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callous” (12), we should remember the discussion of George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss in chapter two, where the narrator points out that fervent beliefs tend to be deemed unfashionable by those who live in wealthy, comfortable homes (238; bk. 4, ch. 3) and who can therefore afford to retain a properly ironic distance.

The unseemly intensity of Doris Kilman’s beliefs is, however, only one reason why Clarissa reacts with such disgust to her daughter’s friend. Another, equally important reason is that Doris Kilman is of German descent and a teacher of history, for as such she reminds Clarissa of the very thing she would like to forget: the horrors of the Great War, for which the class to which Clarissa belongs was ultimately responsible. Miss Kilman, we learn early on in the novel, was treated badly during the war, “all her soul rusted with that grievance sticking in it, her dismissal from school during the War” (12). We have already seen that Clarissa is all too keen on emphasizing that the war is a thing of the past, which explains why the presence, or even the mere thought, of Doris Kilman is so unbearable for Clarissa. Moreover, if Maria DiBattista is right in arguing that Clarissa seeks “unhistorical happiness in plunging spontaneously into the present” (40), then Doris Kilman’s “really historical mind” (Mrs. Dalloway 12) points us toward a fundamental conflict: the clash between, on the one hand, someone who did not suffer directly during the war and who displays an intense love for the present, and, on the other hand, a person who was treated unfairly and whose very presence serves as a reminder of historical injustice.22

This is of course not to say that we should see Doris Kilman as a flawless character, for she may indeed, as Alice van Buren Kelley insists (91–92), occasionally use religion merely as a shield, or be too possessive in her love for Elizabeth (see Mrs. Dalloway 144: “If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and forever and then die; that was all she wanted”). The very name Kilman (‘kill man’), moreover, hardly helps to paint Elizabeth’s friend in a positive light. At the same time, however, we should be wary of situating Doris Kilman “at the negative pole” of the novel’s value system (Kelley 92), as this would mean simply to accept Clarissa’s problematic judgment. Instead, we need to recognize that the extent of Clarissa’s disgust is entirely disproportionate to any real offence on Miss Kilman’s part – a circumstance to which Clarissa readily admits: “[I]t was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered into itself a great deal that was not Miss

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22 Doris Kilman thus functions as a Jungian shadow that Clarissa notably fails to integrate into her sense of self.
Kilman” (12–13). Characteristically, however, Clarissa does not accept any responsibility on her part; it is simply that “one” – not she herself – hates Miss Kilman, because of an “idea” that has, almost magically, “gathered into itself a great deal” that, in fact, has little to do with the real Miss Kilman. The text’s very language – the impersonal pronoun, the passive voice – thus testifies to the extent to which Clarissa desires to repress her own agency and responsibility for injustice.

This evasion of responsibility is most clearly in evidence when Clarissa thinks of her husband’s work in a government committee concerned with the Armenians, a people Clarissa cannot even distinguish from the Albanians:

[Richard] was already halfway to the House of Commons, to his Armenians, his Albanians, having settled her on the sofa, looking at his roses. And people would say, “Clarissa Dalloway is spoilt.” She cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hunted out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard Richard say so over and over again) – no, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians? but she loved her roses (didn’t that help the Armenians?) – the only flowers she could bear to see cut. (131–132)

Clarissa’s admission that she cares more about flowers and her parties than about the Armenians is problematic irrespective of historical context. However, if we bear in mind the extent of genocidal violence committed against the Armenians by the Ottoman military forces during World War I, then Clarissa’s indifference surely is nothing short of appalling:

We don’t know the exact number of Armenians killed in the years following 1915 – or even the number living in Turkey. 1.2–1.4 million killed might be a reasonable guess for 1915–16. [... O]nly about 10 percent of the Armenians living in Turkey in 1914 remained in the country in 1922 – the most successful murderous cleansing achieved in the 20th century. (Mann 140)

Clarissa even muddles “Armenians and Turks” (134), and David Bradshaw rightly points out that doing so in the early 1920s “is only a little less bizarre than muddling Jews and Nazis would be in the latter half of the following decade” (xx).

Nevertheless, Lee R. Edwards attempts to defend Clarissa’s ‘apolitical’ stance, readily conceding that Clarissa’s roses may not help the Armenians much, but also wondering whether the usual schemes of politics – petitions, committees,

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23 On how Doris Kilman is treated by Clarissa Dalloway, see, for example, Pam Morris: “Part of the misery she suffers is at the hands of Clarissa Dalloway. [... She] becomes a figment of her hatred rather than a real person” (65).