Septimus – are also, albeit in different ways, cut off from ordinary personal relationships. James Naremore, for instance, points to Peter’s dream vision of himself as a “solitary traveler” as evidence of his sense of isolation (99; see Mrs. Dalloway 62–64). Naremore also highlights Clarissa’s tendency to retreat from people into her upper room and, most emphatically, to Septimus’s post-traumatic estrangement from his wife and the world (110). Each of these three characters experiences moments of intense and isolated subjectivity during which they believe they have discovered a mysterious, transcendent cosmic unity. As Raymond Williams notes:

This is the ‘collective consciousness’ of the myth, the archetype: the ‘collective unconscious’ of Jung. In and through the intense subjectivities a metaphysical or psychological ‘community’ is assumed, and characteristically, if only in abstract structures, it is universal; the middle terms of actual societies are excluded as ephemeral, superficial, or at best contingent and secondary. Thus a loss of social recognition is in a way made into a virtue: as a condition of understanding and insight. (246)

These characters’ union with a “metaphysical or psychological ‘community’” flows, as Margaret Blanchard astutely observes, from vision rather than from action; it consists in a solitary way of seeing the world, not in a collective attempt to interact with and change it – and thus, like flânerie, ultimately constitutes a luxury that depends on the socio-historical circumstances of the individual in question: “One can afford to conjure up a better world without trying to actualize it only if the world one lives in is tolerable as it is” (Blanchard 305). In the light of these observations, it becomes crucial to note that, of the novel’s three ‘visionary’ characters, only Peter and Clarissa survive, whereas the more beleaguered and less privileged Septimus is unable to re-establish a sense of home in the world and therefore eventually takes his own life.

**Misreading the Other**

More generally, a key feature of Woolf’s novel is that it continually emphasizes the parallels between, on the one hand, the Warren Smiths, and, on the other, the Dalloways and their circle – but only simultaneously to highlight the crucial differences between them. To neglect these differences would mean to misread the story of Septimus and Lucrezia much as it is misread by Peter Walsh early on in Woolf’s novel. In a scene set in Regent’s Park, Peter passes Septimus and Lucrezia, and while he acknowledges that he does not know enough about the two to interpret their behavior adequately, he nevertheless supposes that they

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29 For an argument similar to Naremore’s, see Carlson (57).
are merely “lovers squabbling” (77) – an assessment that gravely underestimates the depth of the Warren Smiths’ personal crisis. The sense that Peter misreads events connected to the Warren Smiths is confirmed later, after Septimus has killed himself. Lucrezia’s reaction to her husband’s suicide is, understandably, a mixture between shock and resignation, and looking back on their married life she movingly concludes: “Of her memories, most were happy” (165). This mood of loving sadness at the end of the novel’s eighth section is disrupted brutally by the opening sentences of section nine, in which Peter hears the sound of an ambulance – in all likelihood the very ambulance that is on its way to the Warren Smiths – and thinks: “One of the triumphs of civilization” (165). A moment of deep sadness for Lucrezia is thus, for Peter, comforting, even uplifting.

We must therefore keep the possibility of misinterpretation in mind when we proceed to Clarissa’s interpretation of Septimus’s suicide towards the end of Woolf’s novel. When the psychiatrist Sir William Bradshaw mentions Septimus’s suicide at her party, Clarissa’s first reaction is one of anger and frustration: “What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party?” (201). Irritated perhaps because the intrusion of death into her home reminds her of her general fear of mortality, Clarissa briefly retires to her room. There, Clarissa’s mood soon changes, and initially she interprets Septimus’s suicide as an indirect comment on her own ethical failures:

They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he [i.e. Septimus] had preserved. Death was defiance. (202)

Clarissa admits, here, not only to a sort of emptiness in her life – her self appears “wreathed about with chatter” – but even to a fundamental sense of dishonesty (“corruption, lies”). By contrast, she believes, Septimus’s suicide has allowed him to save his innermost self from the corruption that comes from living in society:

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. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success. (203)

Given Clarissa’s unflinching criticism of herself, it would be tempting to think that being confronted with Septimus’s suicide constitutes a truly life-changing epiphany for her: a moment of recognition concerning the extent to which the suicide of a shell-shocked war veteran reflects on her own life (including her desire for “success,” and the ethical price she has been willing to pay for it).
However, Clarissa ultimately shies away from her insight and characteristically reinterprets Septimus’s death in entirely apolitical terms. The same, moreover, is true for at least one literary critic, who argues that Septimus’s case should not be regarded in its own right at all, but instead as merely enhancing that of Clarissa in order “to bring to the surface something buried deep in her own life” (Rachman 5). In this view, the story of the shell-shocked war veteran Septimus Warren Smith is not to be read in political terms, but merely as a means of individual self-discovery for Clarissa. However, as John G. Hessler points out, the society that Clarissa has assembled at her party is “the same society that sent Septimus Warren Smith (and many others like him) to the trenches” (135), and we must bear this in mind when we read Clarissa’s final assessment of Septimus’s suicide:

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. [...] 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. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. (204)

While at first Clarissa had read Septimus’s suicide as highlighting her own failures, she ultimately sees his death as little more than an appeal for her to seize the day (he “made her feel the fun”); she does “not pity him,” and even feels “glad that he had done it.” In sharp contrast, Septimus himself had felt little joy when he killed himself, as Deborah Gut reminds us: “Instead, there is the terror of the hunted beast” (“Self-Evasion” 19). Septimus has not preserved his innermost self, as Clarissa would like to believe; rather, he has obliterated his entire self because he could not find a way to restore it from its fragmented, shell-shocked condition. Clarissa’s attempt to interpret a shell-shocked young man’s suicide as an uplifting spiritual triumph is chillingly inappropriate, as well as conveniently compatible with her political complacency.

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30 This argument would be one piece of evidence in support of Dominic Head’s impressively broad thesis that “most of the accepted modernist ‘epiphanies’ are problematic” (21).

31 Margaret Blanchard suggests that Septimus’s suicide cannot be seen as a political gesture (302), and she is of course right in the sense that Septimus is unlikely to have intended it as such. This does not mean, however, that there is no political significance to his action, for – as is generally the case when it comes to interpretation – intentions do not determine entirely the meaning of the interpreted object.
The argument that Clarissa misreads Septimus’s death is supported by another of *Mrs. Dalloway’s* leitmotifs: a quotation from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* that highlights the differences, rather than the similarities, between Clarissa and Septimus. Early in the novel, Clarissa sees an open book in a shop window and there discovers the following lines: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter’s rages” (10). These are the opening lines of a funeral dirge from *Cymbeline*, sung by two male characters:

**Guiderius.** Fear no more the heat o’th’sun  
Nor the furious winter’s rages;  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone and ta’en thy wages.  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.  

**Arviragus.** Fear no more the frown o’th’great;  
Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke;  
Care no more to clothe and eat;  
To thee the reed is as the oak.  
The sceptre, learning, physic, must  
All follow this and come to dust. (84; IV.ii.258–269)

One may note in passing that this dirge evokes the age-old Judeo-Christian topos of death as a return to God as man’s original, true home, and that it also refers to the threat posed by “the tyrant’s stroke” (a theme which, arguably, resonates more strongly with Septimus’s rather than with Clarissa’s story). More importantly, we need to bear in mind that the dirge in Shakespeare’s play is sung for two sharply distinct characters: for Imogen, King Cymbeline’s daughter who, much like Clarissa, remains virgin-like even after her marriage (*Mrs. Dalloway* 34: “she [i.e. Clarissa] could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth”; see King 103); and for Cloten, son of the king’s second wife, a rather self-important and obtuse villain who was in fact killed by Guiderius, one of the two characters who sing the dirge. Hermione Lee thus overestimates the extent to which the Shakespearean intertext suggests a fundamental similarity between Septimus and Clarissa (31). What ought to be emphasized instead is that, for the audience of Shakespeare’s play, the scene is ripe with irony, since the dirge aligns the fate of a lowly villain, killed by one of the singers, with that of a regal woman who – unbeknownst to the singers, but not the audience – is not even dead (i.e. Imogen has drunk a potion that induces a sleep which merely resembles death). The Shakespearean text thus presents us with two widely differing characters: a male figure who dies a violent death, and a female figure who may
appear lifeless, but who in fact remains entirely unharmed and will be miraculously resurrected.

Given these differences, it is worth examining more closely at which points in *Mrs. Dalloway* Clarissa recalls the lines from *Cymbeline* that she finds in a book early on in the novel. If we do so, it becomes apparent that they serve mainly to provide her with a sense of consolation in moments of comparatively mild distress. For instance, the reference to *Cymbeline* is repeated for the first time when Clarissa learns that Lady Bruton has failed to invite her to a lunch party – an event that constitutes a “shock” in the eyes of Clarissa (32). Clarissa remembers the opening lines of the dirge again later, when she is mending a dress in the quiet of her room, “calm, content,” and secluded from the world’s troubles in her comfortable home: “Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall” (43). Here too, thinking of Shakespeare leads to reconciliation, and typically this sense of reconciliation is expressed in aquatic metaphors that create a mythical mood of rebirth and renewal. The third and last time Clarissa remembers the lines is, as we have seen, when she abandons her thoughts about Septimus’s suicide and decides to go back to her party (204). In each of these scenes, then, the Shakespearean text has a consolatory function for Clarissa, though at the same time it is clear that she is not in fact suffering a great deal; her ‘wounds’ are, if not entirely illusory, then clearly not life-threatening.

This contrasts sharply with the case of Septimus, whose psychic wounds prove too deep for literary consolation to be effective. Before the war, Septimus used to admire Shakespeare and what he stood for; indeed, according to the narrator, Septimus “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole,” whose public lectures on Shakespeare Septimus had admired greatly (94). After the war, however, Septimus remains, for a long time, unable to derive any joy from Shakespeare:

That boy’s business of the intoxication of language [...] had shrivelled utterly. How Shakespeare loathed humanity – the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly! This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair. Dante the same. Aeschylus (translated) the same. (97)

The very cultural artifacts that, for Septimus, used to express the highest human values now speak to him only of the deepest despair, and Julia Briggs rightly points out that, in part, Shakespeare has become tainted for Septimus because