

# AP

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## Truth in Literature: A Christian Response to the Homosexuality of Virginia Woolf

By Luke Powell

A classic is best defined as the effective communication of universal truths. It is the search for propriety, moral truth and self-reflection. Thus, as Christians seeking to glorify God through our knowledge and application of his word, it is essential to read the views of believing and unbelieving authors alike. If we do not have this attitude, we become Shakespeare's green-eyed monster which feeds on itself, only concerned by narrowly selected works of art. John Stuart Mill exercises this point perfectly,

*"He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that...Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, resented as they state them, accompanied by refutations. He must be able to hear from the person who actually believes them, who defend them in earnest. He must know them in their plausible and persuasive form"*

Even more so, Christians learn the realities of the human heart expressed by Christ through the classical texts that resonate with so many unbelievers.

Here, we should start with Virginia Woolf. As a feminist writer in the twentieth century, her works have made an indelible mark on Christian culture. Her views on sexuality, marriage and femininity have reverberated into today's language, consequently making Woolf the matriarch of both the feminist and transgender.

Her novel *Mrs Dalloway* remains a prescient prediction on our society, while at the same time being a sad reflection Woolf's own personal life. It is through the words, motifs and thematic devices in the novel, that Woolf explores the perpetuating pull to homosexual gratification and her attack upon the Scriptural standard of marriage. As Christians, by understanding the attraction of *Mrs Dalloway* as a literary classic, the church can better appreciate God's design for marriage and the unsatisfying lusts that saturate the world today.

As a modernist, Woolf championed the deconstructive aesthetic

that broke away from Christian propriety. This is reflected in both the themes and literary devices employed in *Mrs Dalloway*. What immediately strikes the reader is the verbose sentences, littered with frequent uses of ellipses, comas and parenthesis. With such spontaneity, Woolf also explores the mundane task of picking flowers, to the existential crises or mortality weighing down the heroine in the same sentence. Such devices create a stream of consciousness that is both descriptive and emblematic of a person's soul, that resonates with an audience searching for a firm identity...

*"...young, at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside looking on".*

As a character struggling with depression and as a writer afflicted by the abuse of a stepbrother, both Dalloway and Woolf suffer from a tormented soul which is "never to be content quite, or quite secure". This ambivalence and dissatisfaction within the soul foregrounds Woolf's antipathy for institutions of marriage as "always a catastrophe" and conventional love as the catalyst for loneliness. Entire pages are filled with internal monologues on the futility of love towards one's country and one's spouse. *Mrs Dalloway's* husband is also paralysed by the thought of marital love. The only love praised by the Clarissa are the desires of adultery and homosexual affairs, constantly giving her comfort while never satisfying.

Early on in the novel — and indeed throughout Woolf's very own life — Mrs Dalloway becomes infatuated on reversing the effects of aging, time and death by ruminating on a summer spent with Sally Seton. Their love for each other is seen as a "revelation" and even the "happiest" moment of her life. As they meet as older women, Dalloway describes the knowledge of her being married as the "death of her soul" and sees moralised love and religion as "detestable".

Today, the identity and sexuality of our culture mimic the hedonism of Mrs Dalloway. In stark contrast, God's design

for marriage found in the bible, views sexuality differently. Nowhere is this truth best explored than in Woolf's own life. After years of suffering from mental illness, Woolf was damaged by abusive relationships and lesbian affairs. Yet, before Woolf herself committed suicide, she penned the most remarkable piece of writing of her career. Despite all the grievances, she held for men—and wider British society—Woolf clung onto the hope, love and joy that her husband gave her. What follows is an extract of what she wrote to her husband before she ended her life,

*“You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came... What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that — everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me, it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness.”*

Such is God's design. Virginia Woolf who felt the emotions of Mrs Dalloway on the final pages of her book “*Are we not all*

*prisoners?... Despairing of human relationships*”, the answer was the Gospel. It was the redemptive and saving grace of Christ's love for the church explicitly communicated in Ephesians 5 through the matrimony of a man to his wife.

*“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”*

A love that reflects an even greater reality which is the obligation of Christians to communicate. A love that does not affirm homosexuality but preaches the message of salvation which brings about a true repentance. For if we choose not to, even the most adversarial cynics of Christ will never come to realise the redemptive power of the Gospel expressed through marriage. Something that even Virginia Woolf needed desperately.

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