“Once you stumble ... human nature is on you.”

SEPTIMUS WARREN SMITH’S GENDER NONCONFORMITY & SUICIDE IN MRS. DALLOWAY

John C. Polles
Four Questions

1. Who is Septimus Warren Smith?
2. How is he gender nonconforming?
3. How does this relate to his suicide?
4. Why should we care?
1. Septimus Warren Smith

- Secondary Character in Novel
  - No Actual Contact with Clarissa
- World War I Veteran
  - Flashbacks
  - General Malaise
- Married to Lucrezia
2. Gender Nonconformity

- An Inability to Feel
- World War I
- The “Rest Cure”
An Inability to Feel

- Once Empathetic (Woolf 146)
- Lucrezia Newly Unable to Confide in Septimus (Woolf 23)
For now that it was all over, truce signed, and the dead buried, he had, especially in the evening, sudden thunder-claps of fear.

He could not feel.

(Woolf 87)
World War I

- Septimus as “a man shattered by the war”
- A war fought “much more because of incompetence than villainy”

(Bethea 249)
World War I

- Represents Violence, Death
- Masculinity in the Extreme
- “Breaks” (or “shatters”) Septimus
The “Rest Cure”

- So-called treatment for “nervous and hysterical women” who “lie in bed, or on sofas, hopeless and helpless” (Mitchell 269)
- Septimus “sitting in his shabby overcoat alone … hunched up, staring” (Woolf 23)
3. Suicide

- Holmes as Patriarchy
- Clarissa Dalloway
- In the Middle of Her Party
Holmes as Patriarchy

- Most Visceral Reaction from Septimus
- Fixation on “English Husbands” & Ability to Care for Lucrezia (92)
- “The coward!” (149)
- Unable to Understand Septimus’s Motivations
Human nature, in short, was on him – the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils. Holmes was on him. ... Once you stumble ... human nature is on you. **Holmes** is on you.

(Woolf 92)
Clarissa Dalloway

- Uncomfortable with Role as Housewife, Socialite
- “The problem that has no name” (Friedan 1-22)
In the Middle of Her Party

- Hears of Septimus’s Death (183)
- Initially concerned about the impact on the party…
- …but is able to empathize with Septimus (183-84)
  - “Death was defiance” (184)
4. So what?
Works Cited


