As has been discussed at length in the scholarship on *Mrs. Dalloway*, the character Septimus Warren Smith is typically viewed as a composite of those men who were directly exposed to the horrors of the Great War during the conflict and suffered shell-shock. Septimus manifests the typical after-effects of the ordeal, clearly exhibiting not only the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder but also the ravages of survival guilt. Having witnessed the death of Evans, his officer, a man who was not just Septimus’s superior but also apparently his lover (*MD* 84; see also Barrett 152–54), Septimus sought refuge from his suffering after the war by marrying a young Italian woman, Lucrezia, to offset his terrifying sense that “he could not feel” (85; 86). This suppression of sensation (both physical and emotional) is one of many manifestations of his anguish in the aftermath of the war. The damage he endured includes signs of mental instability evidenced by his ramblings and hallucinations, and, most dangerous of all, by his suicidal impulses. However, Septimus’s unusual ideation is not just a symptom of his psychic injuries, it is also evidence of his remarkable creative capacity as both a war poet and a modernist.

Karen DeMeester, in “Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Obstacles to Post War Recovery in *Mrs. Dalloway*,” begins her article with the stark statement “Modernist literature is a literature of trauma” (77). She writes that, “Woolf’s characterization of Septimus Smith…illustrates…the need for survivors to give meaning to their suffering in order to recover from post-traumatic stress disorder” and also notes that “Imagist poetry and the experimental novels of the postwar decade…reflect the fragmentation of consciousness and the disorder and confusion that a victim experiences in the wake of the traumatic event” (77). DeMeester’s argument sequesters the poetics of Septimus’s pre-war and post-war experiences and also isolates Septimus’s work from the actual poetry and literature written during the period. Similarly, Sarah Cole, in her chapter titled “‘My killed friends are with me where I go’: Friendship and Comradeship at War,” aligns Septimus with “the many wracked figures populating the poetry of Owen, Nichols, Sassoon, and others” (180) but does not specifically attribute talented poetic expression to Septimus himself.

While Septimus is regarded by most scholars simply as a victim of the war, suffering from shell-shock and delusions, he has also been compared to specific poets of the era who had experienced the conflict. Elaine Showalter has specifically argued in *The Female Malady* that Woolf’s contact with Siegfried Loraine Sassoon while she was writing *Mrs. Dalloway* inspired and shaped Septimus who, thus, “perhaps owes something of his name, his appearance, and his war experience to Sassoon” (192). Karen Levenback, in her landmark volume *Virginia Woolf and the Great War*, counters Showalter, suggesting that Leonard’s brother, Philip Sidney Woolf, who was injured by the same shell that also killed their brother Cecil Woolf in the Battle of Cambrai, provides “a more proximate model than Siegfried Sassoon” (57). Philip Woolf had witnessed his brother’s death and was later

† A longer version of this essay appears as a chapbook in the Bloomsbury Heritage series, No. 76 (London: Cecil Woolf, 2015), 32 pp.
evacuated to hospital where he recovered from his injuries. After he was discharged, Philip was redeployed to the Front in France where he fought until the end of the war. Levenback aligns Philip with Septimus, who has “no feeling” (MD 85; 86) noting that, during the war, “Woolf had seen [Philip,] Leonard’s brother[,]…pass[ing] his days in a dream…” and “wondering why he d[id]n’t feel more,”4 symptoms of apparent detachment that clearly manifest in Septimus’s mental instability as well (57).

Victoria Glendinning, in her biography of Leonard Woolf, briefly but poignantly discusses “The second and private publication of the Hogarth Press,” a slim volume of fifteen of Cecil Woolf’s poems “written before the war.” The “small booklet—four inches by three” (197), simply titled Poems, that was printed in 1918 and includes Philip Woolf’s preface where he notes that, had “Cecil lived,” the poems might have “been ‘revised and re-polished’” (P. Woolf qtd. in Glendinning 197). Philip thanked Leonard and Virginia for printing the poems, stating: “There’s no book now which means more to me” (P. Woolf qtd. in Glendinning 197). Even though Glendinning asserts that the poems “are no good” (197), she does suggest that the publication of Cecil’s work assuaged Philip’s grief to some degree.5

In concord with Joyce Kelley, who in her essay “‘Corrected In Red Ink’: Septimus Warren Smith, the First World War, and the Culture Of Erasure” describes Septimus as “Mrs. Dalloway’s own ‘soldier-poet,'” I contend that Woolf does not rely on just a single person in her depiction of Septimus and sees him as a composite of all the war poets of the era. Kelley observes that, while “[s]oldiers’ letters were often censored and pre-printed postcards sent home from the Front allowed for only cryptic expression[,]…many ‘soldier-poets’ fought back against the censoring of language, producing works showing the true horrors of war, knowing too well that their culture of repression only bred greater trauma” (25). As she argues, “Significantly, the language of Septimus’s war-inspired illness becomes a threat to the ordered world around him, until Septimus himself must be edited out” (25) through his suicide. I also contend that Septimus is actually depicted as a gifted though troubled poet in Mrs. Dalloway rather than as an inferior writer. Septimus’s life history and his thoughts, his writings, his drawings and his various seemingly random rants can be aligned with the actual writings of as Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Edward Thomas and Isaac Rosenberg, all of whom fought at the Front and witnessed and experienced the war’s horrors directly. However, rather than solely emphasizing Septimus’s work in alignment with that of war poets in this essay, I will also examine elements of Septimus’s ramblings that resonate strongly with the works of two modernist poets—Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot—who (though they never enlisted or saw combat) certainly decried the war.

Just as Clarissa and Septimus serve as doppelgängers in the novel,6 so too Septimus serves as the doppelgänger of all the war survivors and for all the war dead from all social classes and all ranks, for all those who voluntarily joined the armed forces in patriotic euphoria in August 1914 and all those were conscripted as the war progressed. He is a surrogate for the collective lives of the multitudes of working class and lower middle class men who did not have access to university education prior to war. He stands in for those who were wounded but lived—like Philip Woolf or Siegfried Sassoon—and for those who died—like Cecil Woolf or Wilfred Owen. Septimus’s own kaleidoscopic vision of the war also includes the conscientious objectors who refused to participate in the pointless slaughter and who faced the shame of being mocked for cowardice, or endured
imprisonment or even were executed, a sentence inflicted also on those who were charged with desertion, many of whom were either very young or terribly traumatized or both.⁷

Septimus is a particularly rare specimen of the war in that, even though he is “one of the first to volunteer” (84), he was never seriously injured and never re-deployed after a period of recovery. He survives physically intact but bitterly disillusioned. A constant witness to carnage and exposed fully and unrelentingly to the horrors of war, he is severely psychologically ravaged. His sardonic view of the war is offset by his mystic experiences, which transform his ghastly eyewitness realities into visionary though fragmentary poetry. He becomes, as he himself asserts, “the poet of the immortal ode” (95). In constant communion with the war dead, he himself dies and revives as both a poet and a shade and—like those millions who perished in the war—by the end of the novel he is too dead, choosing suicide over impending incarceration in a rest home.

There are multiple instances of Septimus straddling this divide between the living and the dead. For example, when his wife, Lucrezia takes his arm, he thinks of how “it was without feeling. He would give her…a piece of bone” (16), suggesting that he not only doesn’t sense her touch on his flesh but actually perceives himself as having decomposed into a skeleton. In a similarly disturbing passage, Septimus thinks of how “Red flowers [were] gr[owing] through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head” (67), a possible and deeply ironic re-interpretation of John McCrae’s jingoistic war poem “In Flanders Fields,” which describes how “poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row” (1-2; see also Rosenfeld 99) but says nothing of how the roots of these vivid blooms were fed. The red flowers piercing Septimus’s body transform him metaphorically into a decaying corpse lying unburied in the No Man’s Land between the trenches, fertilizing the spring flowers that are blossoming so beautifully and grotesquely.⁸

Prior to the war, Septimus envisions himself as a poet. Born in the provincial town of Stroud, he yearns to go to London and pursue his vocation.⁹ Setting out to realize his dream, he leaves behind for his mother and sister “an absurd note…, such as great men have written, and the world has read later when the story of their struggles has become famous” (82). Once Septimus arrives in the metropolis, he gets a low-level job as a clerk at an auctioneer house to support himself. To foster his Jude-the-Obscure-like yearning for academic knowledge and perhaps to gain more sophisticated control of his poetic expression, Septimus attends lectures on Shakespeare delivered by a Miss Isabel Pole, who is has generally been viewed as a surrogate of Virginia Woolf herself (see Ronchetti n13). While Miss Pole’s judicious edits of Septimus’s poems—written, of course, in red ink¹¹—may suggest that Septimus shows no significant talent as a poet prior to the war, it is also possible that Miss Pole herself fails to recognize that Septimus is actually already a gifted experimental poet. Septimus’s poetics, viewed as inferior by his literary mentor, may modernist experiments that undermine conventional literary expectations. Miss Pole’s attempts to correct Septimus’s work may be comparable to the scathing responses garnered by the controversial works that were displayed at Roger Fry’s1910 “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” exhibit at the Grafton Galleries. If Septimus is truly an experimental poet, his work would be received in much the same fashion. Philipp Blom observes that the criticism of the exhibit included such derogatory terms for the works of van Gogh, Cezanne and Gauguin, using such terms as “hysterical daubs,” “crude intolerable outrages,” “childish rubbish,” “sterile,” and “unmanly,” to describe the works and categorizing them
as “sickening aberrations” from “morbid” and “diseased minds.” Blom argues that this exhibit, “symptom[atic] of ‘the last degradation of art,’” was viewed by critics ‘not [as] art but [as] an attack on all that is beautiful, true and sacred in civilization” (Blom 281). These criticisms of the post-impressionist art works as horrid examples of hysteria, sterility, unmanliness, sickness and disease all are comparable to how Septimus is perceived by Dr. Holmes and Sir Bradshaw. Yet, from the standpoint of narration in Mrs. Dalloway, the creative vision manifested in Septimus’s poems and drawings is validated by the controversial art produced by the post-impressionists.

I would argue that, as readers, our access to Septimus’s radical poetry comes primarily through the muse-like omniscient narrator who sifts through the workings of Septimus’s mind and gives us intermittent access to his inner creativity. In his 1982 essay, “Mrs. Dalloway: Repetition as Raising the Dead,” J. Hillis Miller specifically suggests that Woolf’s “narrator is that state of mind which exists outside the characters and of which they can never be aware. This ‘state of mind’ encloses them, pervades them, knows them from within. It is present to them at all the times and places of their lives. It gathers those times and places together in the moment” (170). The omniscient narrator’s earliest descriptions of Septimus seem almost as though they could be scraps of Septimus’s own poems. These passages manifest experimental cadences similar to those in Ezra Pound’s 1920 rhymed, post-war poem, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” where, in Part I, the poet refers to himself in third person as “E. P.” in the epigraph and depicts the aspirations of an unrecognized outsider seeking to express his creativity in a hostile environment:

For three years, out of key with his time,
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain “the sublime”
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No, hardly, but...he had been born
In a half savage country, out of date;
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn[.]

In the passage where the anonymous omniscient narrator in Mrs. Dalloway describes Septimus, the cadences of prose can be broken into lines of poetry that are evocative of Pound’s metrics:

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[.]

(1–7)
The term “border case” in this passage seems to emphasize not only Septimus’s ambiguous class status but also his manic creativity, an unstable mentality evident prior to his experience of trauma in the war since Septimus is described “tearing up his writing;… finishing a masterpiece at three o’clock in the morning and running out to pace the streets, and visiting churches, and fasting one day, drinking another, devouring Shakespeare, _The History of Civilisation_ and Bernard Shaw” (83).

Later in the novel, when Septimus is driven to defend himself against Dr. Holmes and Sir Bradshaw, the medical and mental health antagonists whom he encounters when his wife Rezia begins to seek professional help to manage her husband’s post-traumatic stress behaviors, Septimus repeatedly refers to Dr. Holmes as the embodiment of “Human nature…the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils” (see _MD_ 90, 91, 144 for variants). Since this language aligns the human condition to the pack mentality of dogs in pursuit of their prey, it also evokes the relentlessness of a dog seeking a bone or some other buried treasure, a morbid horror vividly manifested in T. S. Eliot’s famous passage in “The Burial of the Dead” in _The Waste Land:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men  
Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again! (71-75)

During his visit to Bradshaw, Septimus specifically envisions himself as “the criminal who faced his judges; the victim exposed on the heights; the fugitive; the drowned sailor; the poet” of the immortal ode” (_MD_ 95). This image of Septimus as a “drowned sailor” (_MD_ 67, 95, 137) occurs three times in the novel and echoes Eliot’s direct references to drowning in _The Waste Land_, beginning with Madame Sosotris’s Tarot card reading, with the reference to the Phoenician sailor in line 46 and a warning to “fear death by water” in line 55 of Part I, “The Burial of the Dead.” The motif of the sailor reappears in _The Waste Land_ in the title of Part IV, “Death by Water,” the segment that describes the fate of the drowned Phoenician. Further, there is a passing reference to the phrase in Eliot’s further discussion of the Tarot card in his endnote on line 46.

Septimus’s survivor guilt, clearly evident in this recurrent drowning motif, also grimly evokes Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est,” in which the speaker describes the unforgettable experience of witnessing a man dying of mustard gas:

…Dim,  
through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning  
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (13–16).

Like Owen, Septimus obsessively and uncontrollably remembers what he has witnessed and bears the guilt for having been unable to protect his comrade, Evans, and, as do the other war poets, Septimus also transmits the voices of the deceased themselves, speaking
as an oracle from the cleft between life and death that is the site of trauma. Septimus's anguished poetics of being persecuted as a victim, a fugitive and a criminal, also seems to evoke the Christ-like suffering presented in Eliot's fifth section of *The Waste Land*, “What The Thunder Said” in the lines:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces  
...After agony in stony places  
The shouting and the crying  
Prison and palace and reverberation  
...He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience... (322; 324–26; 328–30; my italics)

It seems relevant as well that Sir Bradshaw's method as a doctor is to force his patients, his “prophetic Christs and Christesses,” to “drink milk in bed” (97) while they are imprisoned in his no doubt highly-profitable rest homes.

Just before Septimus commits suicide in his valiant and successful attempt to thwart his tormentors by leaping from the window of his flat and dying impaled on the bayonet-like railings below, he asks his wife Rezia to give him his stack of various writings and drawings. As he and she sort through them, the scraps of paper reveal the phantasmagoric range of Septimus's creativity and his impossible vision of a peaceful world where universal love will rule (144). I think that the passage itself should be viewed as a modernist war poem.

She brought him his papers,  
the things he had written, things she had written for him.  
She tumbled them out on to the sofa.  
They looked at them together.  
Diagrams, designs, little men and women brandishing sticks for arms,  
with wings — were they? — on their backs;  
circles traced round shillings and sixpences —  
the suns and stars;  
zigzagging precipices with mountaineers ascending roped together,  
exactly like knives and forks;  
sea pieces with little faces laughing out of what might perhaps be waves:  
the map of the world.  
Burn them! he cried.  
Now for his writings;  
how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes;  
odes to Time;  
conversations with Shakespeare;  
Evans, Evans, Evans — his messages from the dead;  
do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister.  
Universal love: the meaning of the world.  
Burn them! he cried.
Septimus, in a spasm of traumatic distress cries out “Burn them!,” but Rezia instead reverently ties the scraps of paper up with silk, preserving the writings and drawings which will momentarily become the sole memorial to Septimus’s creative passion.

Ultimately, one can either continue to view Septimus as a mediocre poet whose inferiority is evidenced by Miss Pole’s laudable attempts to educate and refine his tastes or as a budding poet of significant but unrecognized talent whose work was never fully manifested until the horror of the war inspired him—leaving its hideous scars on his mind but also sparking his quixotic and ardent creative drive, his remarkable modernist experimentation with words and images. If Septimus righteously envisions himself as “the poet of the immortal ode” (95), granting himself the authority to speak poetically for all those who fought in, died in or survived the war, including those who chose to take their own lives in the aftermath, he becomes the ultimate quintessence not only of all the war poets but of all the victims of the war. Not one of Septimus’s poems (nor a single one of his fantastic drawings) is ever published, but these works still trace his extraordinary creative evolution as an unacknowledged poet.

Notes

1. The line is from the third to last line of Sassoon’s Shakespearean sonnet, “The Poet as Hero.” The poem concludes with the vengeful and disturbing lines: “Wound for red wound I burn to smite their wrongs; / And there is absolution in my songs” (13–14).
2. Christine Froula asserts that, “in the war poets’ harrowing turns on the genre [of the elegy], savage ironies all but eclipse consolation” (90).
3. Kathryn Van Wert sees a possible connection to the poet Rupert Brooke (75) based on Woolf’s note, “Founded on R.?” in a fragment of a draft about Septimus written on 19 November 1922 (Van Wert inaccurately indicates that Brooke fought during the war when he actually died of sepsis just prior to the Battle of Gallipoli). Van Wert also points out that David Bradshaw aligns Septimus with Ralph Partridge and Gerald Brenan, both of them lovers of Dora Carrington and acquaintances of Virginia Woolf. As Bradshaw notes, Septimus (like Partridge and Brenan), had been awarded war crosses (see MD 86). Bradshaw also considers Brenan’s smaller physique to be more similar to that of Septimus than Partridge (Van Wert 88 n3; see Bradshaw 121). Neither Partridge nor Brenan was a poet.
4. In 1961, Philip committed suicide. He was 71 years old (see Glendinning 410).
5. There are very few copies of this rare publication, and I have not had access to these poems.
6. See for example Friedman 212.
7. In 2006, the British Defense Secretary, Des Browne, began the process to pardon all 306 soldiers who had been executed at dawn after being convicted of desertion or cowardice (see http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/bug/16/military.immigrationpolicy). Of those who had been shot at dawn during the war, Private Harry Farr and Private James Swaine were the first to be pardoned when the process began on 18 February 2007 (see http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/feb/19/military.uknews4).
8. At the Tower of London, an installation of 888,246 ceramic poppies titled “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red” and created by artist Paul Cummins was installed between August 5 and November 11, 2014. The poppies purportedly represented a remembrance of every known British and Colonial military death in the Great War, the unveiling of the work marking the first day of the British engagement in the war (August 5 being the centenary of British involvement in the war) and the placement of the last poppy acknowledging the date of the armistice four years after the war began. The poppies were sold in advance for £25 each. Ten percent of the proceeds were to be distributed to British military charities. Other 2014 remembrances of the British involvement in the war include http://www.greatwar.co.uk/events/ww1-uk-events.htm. Images of the installation can be viewed at http://slimpaley.com/art/blood-swept-lands-and-seas-of-red/. Maggie Humm provided information on the V’Woolf listserv regarding the installation. She noted the pacifist gathering in Parliament Square in London on August 4 (http://www.cnduk.org/cnd-media/item/1958-no-glory-no-more-war-4-august-parliament-square) and referenced the conscientious objector website, http://www.ppu.org.uk/nomorewar/, an organization that distributes white poppies on Remembrance Day.
9. Septimus shares similarities with another thwarted poet, Judith Shakespeare, who, because of her sex, and despite her intelligence and aesthetic creativity, is reduced to her fecundity in *A Room of One’s Own*. Natania Rosenfeld suggests that for Woolf both are Messiah figures (5).

10. Jane Goldman argues that Septimus’s “passion for poetics seem to have spurred him to war” (55), as evidenced by the passage where the narrator states that, “He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (*MD* 84). Goldman asserts that his “apprenticeship [was] cut short by the Great War” (55), while I would argue that the war itself is the ultimate inspiration for his poetry.

11. Kelley observes that “By the time Septimus leaves the war, he, too, has been ‘corrected in red ink,’ changed, stripped of emotion until he cannot feel even the death of his closest war companion, Evans: ‘The War had taught him’ (86), with the word ‘taught’ underscoring that pedagogical correction” (29).

12. See Rosenfield (4-5; 99) for a detailed discussion of this term.

13. Van Wert observes that in the earlier drafts of the novel, “Evans sings the verses that will ultimately become Septimus’s ‘immortal ode to Time’” (82) in *Mrs. Dalloway* (*MD* 68).

14. This phrase also resonates intriguingly with the repeated Shakespearean “fear not the heat o’ the sun” motif in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

**Works Cited**


