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Great literature

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The human experience is vast and varied; so often it feels as though we are each navigating dark, uncharted waters, that we are "far out to sea and alone". But it is perhaps in Mrs Dalloway's very admittance to this feeling, and in every character's admittance to every feeling, that great literature then becomes the lighthouse.

These deep, dark waters, however, are often deeper and darker for some. The exploration of gender and sexuality through history has remained some of the stormiest seas one has to traverse. A historically religion-centric society has festered a deep-rooted, institutionalised disdain for the queer individual. In recent years, however, some might argue that growing marriage equality — in Australia and even the unwavering Catholicism of Ireland — mainstream conversation and Netflix's Queer Eye implies that this discrimination is ...over, right? But unfortunately, this is not the case. While tolerance and acceptance are widespread for so many, events such as the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting tell a different story.

The experience of the minority has never been easy. To not fit in is to stand out, to be isolated and lost. The experience particularly for queer individuals is a highly solitary and secretive one, historically it dominates the notion of 'taboo' —

"queer" itself means strange, or peculiar. LGBT individuals, particularly the youth of the community, have to not only navigate these waters, but do so without anyone around them finding out.

And this, I think, is really the pinnacle of why great literature has such an impact; because it is perhaps the only way to feel solidarity when you are alone. A text makes you feel as though Virginia Woolf is speaking directly to you, understanding your exact experience, and yet simultaneously illuminates the community of people who also feel everything you are feeling.

When I told my mum I was studying Woolf this term, she lit up with familiarity and memory. *To the Lighthouse,* she said, I read that in uni. It was life changing. Woolf has this incredible ability to pinpoint and articulate the most fundamental truths of the human experience. She was famous for introducing an emphasis on the interiority, revolutionising the novel as the early 20th century knew it, exposing the unspeakable thoughts swarming behind the collective stiff upper lip of the establishment of her day. In this, Woolf creates complex and deeply human characters; for example, the eponymous Mrs Dalloway, wrestling with her sense of self and purpose.

Of course, Woolf has pinpointed and expressed a host of experiences, values and desires in the human condition. Jeanette Winterson, a queer author of the present day, wrote about Woolf, "I argue that it is not Woolf's remoteness that puts people off but her nearness that terrifies them ... it is excess; the unbearable quiver of nerves and the heart pounding. It is exposure. And it is exactness." However, to me, her

impact was and still is greatest for the minorities of gender and sexuality, those that are queer, female, and particularly those that fall under both. It is this exactness that resonates so deeply with each boat that is so alone on such tumultuous seas.

But this representation reads so authentically and genuinely because it is an account of Woolf's own experiences, her own slice of the human condition and that of those around her. In her novel *Orlando*, she writes, "For it would seem — her case proved it — that we write, not with fingers, but with the whole person. The nerve which controls the pen winds itself about every fibre of our being, threads the heart, pierces the liver." Woolf's writing is embedded with her own truth, and such not only is her voice beautifully resonant and detailed, but it builds a bridge of solidarity through time, from the modern reader to a like mind of the past.

From her diaries and letters, we know that she shared many relationships with women. But Woolf's writing is also shaped by her identity as a woman, and more importantly, a feminist.

This distinct queer, feminist voice permeates every one of her novels, with a refreshing focus on representing the complexities and particulars of the queer female experience.

In my own reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, I found Woolf's representation simply divine. Clarissa explores her feelings for women so vividly — "a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed" — such a fundamental and intimate notion, expressed with such exactness.

The queer feminist prose divulges Clarissa's most intimate thoughts and feelings at the very forefront of the text, almost

four pages worth, and such provides one of the richest expressions of queer identity I personally have ever read.

Woolf was shattering glass ceilings with her literature. But glass ceilings are most certainly not the path of least resistance, and to have a room of one's own to write as such is a rare opportunity when an assortment of unsympathetic landlords hold the monopoly on real estate.

Hence, queer voices in literature are scarce, and even more so, the voices of queer women; it is often either overtly sexual, capitalised upon, disingenuous, stereotypical, or diluted, watered down for the *sensitive* palate of society.

In short, to find Something or Someone to truly find a likeness with, to see oneself in, is nothing short of a miracle. Perhaps it is this rarity that makes it all the more special, that deepens the bond we have with these works of great literature. It is these glimpses of ourselves in literature that shape us and nurture our sense of self, that connect us to our rich history and community. Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs Dalloway*, the magic of *Orlando*, the experiences of Woolf herself, gift a life-altering sense of solidarity and representation to some of the most vulnerable and isolated.