

## Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway - An experiment with time

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Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was an English novelist, essayist, biographer and feminist. Woolf represents a historical moment when art was integrated into society, she is described by T S Eliot as “Without Virginia Woolf at the centre of it, it would have remained formless or marginal ... with the death of Virginia Woolf, a whole pattern of culture is broken”. Woolf was a modern, at the same time she was also a late Victorian.

Virginia Woolf stands apart from her age, she wrote about extra ordinary rather than dealing with ordinary people. The characters of her novels are the specimen of the people of their age. Indeed there is no denying the fact when the age has no solid norms, the extra ordinary becomes normal.

Virginia Woolf pioneered “stream of consciousness” style of writing, in her novels she demolished accepted conventions and transformed ideas about structure, plot and characterization. The novels of Woolf tend to be less concerned with outward reality but more with the inner life of her characters. Because of Stream of Consciousness technique her novels are put in the category of modern fiction. External events occupy little space in the novel the writer as an omniscient narrator has almost everything stated appears by the way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatic characters and the novel does not progress on “what – happens – next” basis, but rather moves forward through a series of scenes arranged according to a sequence of selected moments of consciousness and the techniques to which Mrs. Woolf mainly employs are interior and free association. Woolf's novels does not become chaotic or incoherent rather she as an artist achieves great explicitness, coherence, vividness and surface unity in the presenting the character's inner world. The other unique feature of her novels is that the central intelligence of the novelist is constantly at work as the narrator, controlling and organizing the material and illuminating it with her comments.

Virginia Woolf is adequately conscious of the frailty of life and transience of beauty. This fleeting and changing life makes her sad and melancholy. According to a critic: “the fact of beauty, on the one hand, the fact of mutability on the other, these are the two poles on which her panorama of human experience revolve. In *To The Lighthouse* she seems to suggest that there is a permanent principle of beauty at work in the universe behind the

visible & the palpable. But, in fact, the vision which permeates most of her books is that of a life so beautiful yet so sad and melancholy. No Clash, no Violent

Passions: Her vision of life determines the form of her novels too. Almost all her characters are solitary, enveloped in their own. Hence there is hardly any drama in her novels as drama means a clash of characters. Her vision of life makes her mainly concerned with the aesthetic aspects of life without caring for the moral ones. Hence her characters are shown as beautiful and ugly, happy or sad, but not good and bad. Mrs. Woolf's novels are without clash of characters, without action and drama and with very little moral values. Intense love is outside her range. That is why she fails to convince the reality of Rezia's grief at the death of her husband. Virginia Woolf had her own original vision of life and she has ever remained truthful to her vision. And this truthfulness and this artistic integrity is due to her perfect detachment from all personal prejudices and preconceived notions or from any personal end. Literary traditions and conventions, or social and political problems of the day nothing could deter her from writing according to the idea which exists in her mind with uncommon artistic sincerity and integrity. And then Mrs. Woolf was a 'naturalist' as well as a 'contemplative'. In the words of Bernard Blackstone; "She observes new facts, and old facts in a new way, but she also combines them, through the contemplative act, into new and strange patterns. The outer is not only related to, it is absorbed into the inner life. Mrs. Woolf believed in the power of the mind and so she makes her reader think."

It is in Mrs. Dalloway that Virginia Woolf achieves perfection in the technique of stream-of-consciousness. As the mind ranges without limitation of time and space, the novel basically deals with the past of its characters than with the present of its single day. Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway is the focal point and all the actions revolve around her.

In the words of David Daiches: "Around 1920, the apparent collapse of a public standard of significance, new notions of time, and new notions of consciousness made themselves felt on the technique and the themes of fiction, the isolation of the individual consciousness steadily become the most important psychological fact in a world from which public value seemed to have departed and where every individual was sent to be the prisoner of his unique stream – of – consciousness". The subject of Mrs. Dalloway is not limited to the characters of the novel only but it extends to become a universal human novel. The lines from the plays of William Shakespeare which are woven into Clarissa's reflections, from this point of view the fabric of the novel is spun between the lines.

"Fear no more the heat of sun  
Nor the furious winter's rages"

And

“If it were now to die

I were now to be most happy”

*“Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end”.*

Mrs. Dalloway has got a unique structure in which the writer uses the time period of merely one day that day when Clarissa turns fifty and is preparing for the evening party. Thus this novel is the story of the character of Clarissa, struggling through one day in time; Woolf compels the reader to consider the possibilities beyond the material world and into the possibilities and realms of the spiritual world. Woolf's main concern in the novel is to depict the inner workings of Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf very beautifully merges the concept of time that plays a very important role in the novel to depict and define the moments of being and non-being. Clarissa is a character, which is middle aged and has lived through the calamity of war and she has grown to believe that living even one day is dangerous. Death is very natural in her thoughts. Paradoxically she is travelling during that one day between her present, her past and her thoughts about the future. In the novel we understand pieces of her life which create her the present woman. The writer mentions the day June 13, 1923. The novel is a very beautiful description of the various actions that happen on that particular day from morning till midnight. At 10:00am Mrs. Dalloway begins her walk, she remembers herself at 18, seeing the world through younger eyes, the calm air, the trees, the flowers and Peter Walsh. At 10:05 am she meets old friends, then 2 minutes later running into Hugh makes Clarissa recall memories of Peter Walsh at 10:30 she thinks about death, then about her daughter Elizabeth and Elizabeth's teacher. At 10:35 she hears a car backfire and the question is who was that? 11:00 is the time when her old friend Peter Walsh pays a visit to her house and she unites him for her party. At 11:00 only she remembers her old friend Sally Seton, who was a big influence on her as a young girl. Then she feels depressed and has a feeling of emptiness and admits to not believing in God. 2:45 pm is the time when Clarissa does not want her cousin, Ellie Henderson, to come to the party and notices Elizabeth praying with Miss Kilman. At 3:30 pm she notices an old woman climbing stairs and believes it to be a good sign. At 7:30 pm the much awaited moment comes when party begins, at 7:45 her old friend Sally now married comes as Lady Rosseter. At 9:00 pm Sir William Bradshaw and his wife arrives and begins the news of Septimus suicide. At 10:00 pm she again sees old woman who is going to bed and

goes back to the party, then at 3:00 pm the party has finally ended and Clarissa is able to talk with her old friends Peter and Sally.

The structure of the book is carefully built up and the most enticing result is that out of a series of incomplete materials a complete plot is constructed. In the novel, Mrs. Dalloway very narrow space is given to the action. It is started, developed and finished within a single day in the life of its central figure Mrs. Dalloway and spatially to a single place, that is, London. When we consider the mental journey of characters we get action taking place not only in London but other places also. Mrs. Dalloway thinks about her experiences of Bourton, suddenly her thought springs and she starts living in the present of London. Besides the story of Mrs. Dalloway Virginia Woolf also uses certain images, symbols to give a glimpse of the daily life of London. For example, the back firing of a motor car engine, and the aeroplane advertising some coffee. The whole book is built on such pattern. The back firing of motor car throws our attention to the bystanders who are curious to know about the person in the cars. Therefore, the movement fluctuates between present and past. A point of Mrs. Dalloway's consciousness is fixed, and from this point the movement swings back through time, away in space, opening vistas and presenting experience and character, thus we are brought back to the present movement. Thus, Virginia Woolf gives more importance to mental journey of Mrs. Dalloway.

Along with the story of one day, there are parallel plots running of Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith.

The story of Septimus Warren Smith, who impinges upon her consciousness early in the day and whose death throws a shadow over her party in the evening, is the means of introducing another group of characters, a darker side life, and a more profound sense of the historic background against which the whole is set. The major characters are no more than five and they stand out from the rest with a distinctive prominence, for it is they alone who reveal their thoughts to the readers in prolonged and repeated soliloquy as well as in conversation. These five major characters move round each other, as it were, in two concentric circles, Clarissa, Peter Walsh and (rather more faintly drawn) Richard Dalloway in the one, Septimus and Rezia Warren Smith in the other. Around each of these two inner circles there is a ring of minor characters, such as Sally Seton, Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread, Elizabeth Dalloway and that important foil to Clarissa, Doris Kilman: round the Warren Smith Orbit move. Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, through whose appearance at the party the two themes are ultimately interlocked. Further in the

background are a number of figures, unimportant in themselves, but helping to compose the total scene and each one of them supplying an essential part of the pattern.

Based on the plot and main events of the novel we can say that time is one of the most prominent themes in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The clock measures time, but on the other hand time is also told by the timepiece of the mind and it is called 'psychological time' – a term coined by the philosopher Henri Bergson. The time system of the mind is subjective and personal, whereas the clock represents time that is objective and public. Woolf's treatment of time aligns with and contributes to "intellectual atmosphere." Richard Dalloway's walk home from luncheon is a powerful instance of internal time surpassing the external time in which it is harbored. In exploring the dichotomy between external and internal time, Woolf is able to touch the concept of "mobile reality" in which reality is similar to a river, just as water does not remain in one place in a river for more than a fraction of second and one cannot simply line up these pots of water or these ponds until they are the length of the river in order to regain all river properties.

Thus if we see the treatment of time in this novel we can very well compare it with the importance of time in our day to day life, time if properly channelized and used give proper direction to our lives. The reader gets the powerful and philosophical message about time through Woolf's this novel and it is interesting that the novel was given the title *The Hours* also indicates the significance of time as one of the novel's themes.

Virginia Woolf shows new techniques to express a different point of view with regard to the notion of time. Woolf introduces a contrast between internal and external time. Firstly, it shall be seen that internal time is a psychological and subjective time. It is measured by the relative emotional intensity of a moment. This time is fluid, elastic and mobile. In fact, the novel within the framework of twenty-four hours reveals the whole of Clarissa Dalloway's life and that of Septimus Warren Smith. To begin with, we have the memories of Clarissa Dalloway. First there are fragments of her childhood experience as her live for Sally, which has been very important in her life. Her eighteen years old become omnipresent in this day. We see that from the very beginning of the novel, as Clarissa steps into the street in front of her house, her past is suddenly with her.

"What a lark!" What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plugged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning, like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at

the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?" – was that it? – Prefer men to cauliflowers' – was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace – Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered his eyes, his pocket knife, his smile, his grumpiness and when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! A few sayings like this about cabbages."

It must be noted that this kind of memories are almost omnipresent throughout the novel and get mixed up with the present moment. However, the most pertinent fact in these memories of Bourton is Clarissa's refusal to Marry Peter Walsh's she is constantly thinking of this. Here we see the elasticity of time, which can be changed in her dreaming. The distinction between dream and reality, between past and present is not clear. Woolf also inserts an external aspect of time to remind the characters that time is passing. External time is objective and chronological and creates a great contrast with internal time, which is subjective and elastic. External time is usually represented by the flow of history, dates, calendars and time tables.

In the novel, it is especially marked by the booming of different clocks from which Big Ben, the big Westminster's clock, is the most important. Their clocks ring the hours and doing so, they also cut up the flow of time passing. They mark the "irrevocable" present. As Elaine Showalter has referred: "Woolf's working title during most of the time she was writing had been 'The Hours', and the insistent chiming of clocks keeps us aware of the passage of time and the measuring out of human lives and seasons."

This title depicts very well the theme of time in the novel, showing the importance of every hour.

The main function of the clocks is to bring the characters and the reader back to present reality and to bring up the flow of consciousness. Sometimes, the clocks accomplish their function with such a precise and a definitive way that they seem threatening. The first strike of the novel already shows this feeling. The clocks break the silence that Clarissa feels before, it is like a threat, and first, there is "a warning, musical, then the hour, irrevocable". No one can escape from the passing of time. This irrevocable function of the clocks is well seen just after Septimus' suicide. "The clock was striking – one, two, three! How sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering, like Septimus himself. But the clocks went on striking, four, and five six .....". Here the clocks

remind the readers that time has no pity. Even if Septimus is dead, life goes on and cannot come back. And it also means that death is irrevocable, we will all die one day and clocks remind us of it. The clocks serve as an example of the experimental time. This idea of time reminds as of the well known latin expressions. “Tempus fugit” and “Carpe diem”, which means that time flies and that we have to enjoy the present. As we have seen Woolf uses different narrative techniques, which reflects a modernized treatment of fiction. The intersection of external and internal time in the novel shows the great complexity of time, as a them. The new novelistic structure erases the distinction between past, present and future and also between dream and reality. A moment can be repeated, recapitulated as changed in the mind of the different character. Moreover, Woolf shows a variety of different points of view on the aspect of time passing on. First of all, there is the contrast between sane and insane vision, but both converge to the same idea, i.e. to the apprehensive of death. Death is opposed to life, which has to be valued by living and appreciating the present moment. That is what Clarissa wants to show with her party. And Woolf with the story of a single day: she wants to demonstrate the beauty and the greatness of life considered in its simpler actions.

Virginia Woolf’s message about time should be heeded. Tension abounds in our modern world as we create technology to increase our efficiency. Our civilization tends to see scientific and monumental achievements as the most valid measures of an individual success. However, in the process, our communities disintegrate. More and more people complain of feeling alienated. The evidence surrounds us. The internal time that allows us to slow down and be involved with people finds itself dominated by external societal time. Some might find Clarissa Dalloway’s gift to the world to be trivial. However, we need individuals with the ability to pull people together – people with the ability to create community where it no longer exists.

Furthermore, the novel is concerned with the effects the past has on the present. Memories of the past show the dreams and expectations the characters had on life when they were young. Most of the characters presented in Mrs. Dalloway failed to fulfill their dreams and this has effects on their present situation. Clarissa mourns that her life is superficial and passionless as she was different when she was young. Peter did not become a writer and Richard not successful in politics. Sally Seton, who was wild and rebellious, is married to a manufacturer and the intellectual Doris Kilman has become a religious fanatic. Finally, Septimus, who want to be a poet, is suffering from shell shock and is mentally not able to be a poet and to love his wife who dreamt of having children. Especially the relationship

and memories of Clarissa and Peter show the effects of unfulfilled dreams. The memories of their past are like a mirror and they reflect their present situation. But the present Clarissa does not change her attitudes, she does not learn from her memories. The way Clarissa was in Bourton embodies her ideal picture of herself, but she also feels attacked when Peter questions her past decisions. She recalls these passionate feelings for him which she missed, compares their story to a play where the final act is about to finish and she impulsively wished that he would take her with him. Peter is also recalling his past feelings and wishes that past decisions had been different when he asks her. “Are you happy, Clarissa? Does Richard .....

They are interrupted by Elizabeth and the round of Big Ben. For Peter, the strikes evoke memories of the past with Clarissa and remind him of their moments which time has taken away from him. “No! No! He cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried, and marched up Whitehall, as if there rolled down to him, Vigorous, unending, his future.

He wants to feel again like he felt thirty years ago and is not interested in living with the present Clarissa. Peter and Clarissa do not live a linear time, they try to get back to find their unity again, throughout memories they share. The party brings them finally together, but they are still apart as they as well as their memories of their common past have changed.

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