

# Place, Space, and Time in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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## Faculty Introduction

Dr. Tracy Bilsing

Alivia chose to extend the scholarship of the exploration of spatial memory in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. In her interpretation, Alivia joins the conversation with the plethora of Woolf scholars and increases an integral part of Woolf studies, the Modernist, literary representation of the schismatic self during global war. Through her research on contemporary philosophers of the early 1900s (Henri Bergson and Gustave Bachelard) and current scholars, Alivia focuses on tracing the protagonist's memories of important spaces in her past, and notes the peculiarly gendered surroundings of post-WWI London, which are at times in stark contrast with Clarissa Dalloway's pre-war memory. Alivia concentrates most intently on how Woolf represents the manipulation of time in the mind, the past flowing uneasily with the present, with a peculiar emphasis on the all-consuming damage provoked by WWI.

## Abstract

*Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's post-WWI Modernist novel, uses the philosopher Henri Bergson's theory of time as a lens to explore the human condition innovatively and excitingly by employing Bergson's psychological time and stream of consciousness. Providing the inner thoughts of individuals during a single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, Woolf plays with linearity and chronological time as a way to explore how characters' memories of the past shape their present identities as they all wrestle with the finite mortality they share. Employing both Bergson's psychological time and the literary device, stream of consciousness, Woolf unveils the characters' past and present thoughts and emotions in real time (often how the human brain works naturally), providing a unique and innovative perspective on the impact of time on her characters' lives during a period of global mourning and psychological exploration.

Virginia Woolf's Modernist novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, uses the concept of time as a lens through which to explore the human condition innovatively and excitingly. The novel's exploration of time is complex and multifaceted as Woolf employs flashbacks and a stream of consciousness to highlight the characters' past and present thoughts and feelings. This writing style allows the reader to see how the passage of time affects the characters in a new and trailblazing way. Virginia Woolf wrote a novel about a day in the life of a woman who proved that there is never a way to truly know another person in their entirety. She shows how time can be both linear and nonlinear and how it can be a source of both joy and pain; Woolf also uses time to explore the themes of memory and death, the characters' memories of the past shaping their present identities as they all wrestle with the finite mortality they share—especially in the main character, Clarissa Dalloway.

To understand the concepts and vocabulary that Woolf would have been employing in *Mrs. Dalloway*, one must first familiarize themselves with one of the most significant French philosophers of the time, Dr. Henri Bergson. Having lived through the turn of the twentieth century, right before Woolf started writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Bergson contributed to the field of psychology as he explained his theory on psychological determinism. Calling this theory, “*élan vital*,” or Creative Evolution, Bergson explains that our minds and consciousness are not bound by a strict sense of determinism or time, as suggested by the traditional

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school of thought pushed forth by science and philosophy. He believes that this force gives each life a sense of unpredictability and myriad possibilities. In his presumption, Bergson believes there are two fundamentally different conceptions of time—measurable, linear time (chronological time) and subjective, experiential time (the perception of time humans experience). Experiential time is “adaptable; it is always in motion and can be packed or expanded. A period compressed in the brain appears to pass rapidly in contrast with clock time: an occasion took more clock time than the human mind perceived” (Sruthi 203). Experiential time is also not exposed to sequence or linearity. It is concerned with memory, desire, expansion, pressure, and affiliation; it moves in relation to other moments around it and is profoundly emotional; it can exist as faster or slower in comparison, often times what

is the speed of a human's recollection of memories (Sruthi 204; Bergson). These moments of experiential time can be considered flashbacks that are remembered after something in a person's environment triggers the relational memory. Allowing the audience to see into the minds of the characters in a way that was rarely done before, Modernist authors opened the door to a new layer of characterization for analysts. Within *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf would have used Bergson's Dualism of Time theory as it influenced the authors of the time through its principle of introspection and recollection of memory.

In her essay in the 1925 publication of *The Common Reader*, entitled "Modern Fiction," Woolf uses the term "atoms" to describe the "myriad" elements of one's memory, and the emotions tied to it. For Woolf, this idea is pivotal to understanding the self. By "recording atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall," she "trace[s] the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the [character's] consciousness" (Woolf). This was a revolutionary concept as Woolf reacted to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and his use of stream of consciousness, as well as the new techniques of her time, in "Modern Fiction." She claimed that this new era of writing was "somehow an improvement upon the old" as they broke away from the "simplicity" of the Victorian and Romantics of before (Woolf 157). In his book, *The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and Its Contexts*,

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Peter Widdowson outlines that Modernist authors "reject the past and its traditions, yet they nonetheless agree that there is a 'reality' that needs to be understood and portrayed; and that art is the most effective means of doing so" (169). Up until the late nineteenth century, characters and their plot lines had seemed straightforward. Their thoughts represented their actions with little nuance or "gray areas" that the Modern novel uses as authors moved away from the clear-cut storytelling of their literary predecessors (170). Widdowson goes on to explain the belief that Modernist authors reflect reality through the depiction of humanity's duality and complexities, unlike any period of writing before through interior monologues that are "usually triggered by a memory, emotion or association" (169).

Woolf is no exception to this rule, as she uses time in *Mrs. Dalloway* to explore the variety of human emotions. Following the new Modernist

model, she created a novel that depicted daily life as disjointed and dysfunctional as she could. Throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf uses Bergson's definitions of experiential time liberally as she creates consciousness in her characters that would then allow them to explore themselves. Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith, and Peter Walsh help create a stronger relationship between the audience and the character due to the fact that Woolf includes their innermost thoughts and desires. This vulnerable relationship allows for a normalization of introspection and reflection on the self for the reader, a concept that would have been frowned upon in Mrs. Dalloway's society.

*Mrs. Dalloway* follows a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a politician's wife in her fifties, as she prepares for her dinner party that evening. While there is extraordinarily little that happens during the specific twenty-four hours in the text, *Mrs. Dalloway* encompasses years' worth of actions, conversations, and emotional turmoil. Even though they are seemingly meaningless events in Clarissa's day, these events apply

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only to the present timeline of the novel. Throughout the day, Clarissa reflects on her past, her choices, and her relationships as she interacts with their physical presence or

remembrance. The narrative shifts between various characters, including Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked WWI veteran struggling with mental illness; Peter Walsh, Clarissa's former suitor who has returned from India; and others from Clarissa's past and present. As the day progresses, the characters' paths intersect, and their thoughts and memories interweave, their dialogue and interiority revealing more than what is told to the audience by the narrator. The story culminates with Clarissa's party that night, where she learns of Septimus' suicide. This news prompts her to reflect on life, death, and her existence in a way she hadn't done in the novel thus far. *Mrs. Dalloway* is the perfect example of the innovative work done by authors during Virginia Woolf's lifetime.

Unlike previous periods of English writing, these Modernist works are marked by an intrusion of thoughts and layers to the main characters of their stories. The revelation of the memories that resurface are not only not in chronological order, but they are also not arbitrary to the present situation as humans often think about previous connections to their present surroundings and situations. The duality of the timelines

that appear in *Mrs. Dalloway* highlights the way that memories shape an individual's present identity as they wrestle with the finite mortality of the human condition.

Josalba Ramalho Vieira argues in the dissertation *Henri Bergson's Theory of Time and Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, and The Waves*, that

[c]hronological time is inconsiderate with feelings because it keeps going on despite the people's will to stop it at certain moments of life. Time is indifferent to any kind of hindrance and, thus, it never stops. (41)

Woolf uses this conceptual technique frequently throughout the novel. Instead of simply allowing her characters to express their feelings through normal chronological conventions, dialogue, or physical actions, she uses the narrative lens to explore the inner thoughts of Clarissa and Peter to convey each character's struggle over the passage of time. In one of the most famous passages in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa is leaving her home to hunt for flowers "when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air" (Woolf 1). She—and, by proxy, the audience—is transported back to Bourton, Clarissa's family estate in the countryside, where she is greeted with memories of Peter Walsh, "his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile. His grumpiness" and more connections to "a girl of eighteen as she then was" (3). Breathing in the air of the midsummer day, the audience gains a sliver of understanding of what it means to be Clarissa Dalloway as she reflects upon an emotionally conflicting memory. While happy memories are a pleasant treat for Clarissa, thirty-four years later, she is still reminiscing on the time she spent with her friends and future husband in this place as well as the nasty comment Peter had given her all those years ago. Allowing the memory to carry her down the street, this also reveals how passionately she once felt about Peter, who had yet to be introduced to the audience.

The reader's first perception of Peter is from Clarissa's perspective, as are other main characters. The reader is allowed to connect, interpret, and feel Clarissa Dalloway's emotions towards the characters, not by what she says, but by the memories that the reader is privy to. This is illuminated by the way Peter and Clarissa later converse as we are yet again allowed to see Clarissa's inner thoughts:

“In love,” [Peter] repeated, not speaking rather dryly to Clarissa Dalloway; “in love with a girl in India.” He had deposited his garland. Clarissa could make what she would of it. “In love!” she said. That he at his age should be sucked under in his little bow-tie by that monster...her eye flashed back to her; but in her heart she felt, all the same, he is in love...He was in love! Not with [Clarissa]. With some younger woman, of course. (33)

This scene allows the reader a new lens through which to interpret Clarissa’s feelings toward Peter. From the present, they are old friends, acquaintances at least. But the subtle interiority of Clarissa’s thoughts highlights their once-romantic passions as she ponders the “gaiety [that] would have been [hers] all day” if only she had chosen Peter over Richard during that pivotal summer in Bourton (34). This memory indicates another layer of complexity to fifty-two-year-old Clarissa who looks back with not only regret but with fondness for the relationship she once had with Peter, thirty years in the past.

In “For there they were: *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa, and *Mrs. Dalloway*,” José Luis Araújo Lima identifies

the reason why she [subconsciously] looks for Peter [even after she is married], as if she could find in him a little of her former self, of the Clarissa of Bourton, with the thrill, the flavour, the excitement of over thirty years before. (110)

Clarissa sees herself as a woman who, “had the oddest sense of being herself invisible” (Woolf 9), one who is now “unseen” and “unknown.” To some effect, her aging has made her not even the Clarissa Peter knows anymore. But when she sees Peter again, those insecurities of aging go away. The memories rush back to Bourton and Clarissa as a younger woman instead of the “suddenly shriveled, aged, [and] breastless” adult she now is (19). Lima argues that the way she defends herself mentally from the physical withering of age is the “flux of life” (110) and that the seemingly “astonishing” and “solemn” nature of life arises from the perpetual struggle between life and death that unfolds in every day, where life constantly teeters on the edge of the world’s influence (Woolf 9). Stream of consciousness, in its entirety, can be boiled down to an invisible string that carries along, through all of humanity—living,

weaving, and surviving in all of us. This fact, according to Lima, makes death irrelevant (112). Virginia Woolf shares this sentiment, leaving the audience to decipher what is often deemed the novel's most pivotal scene: its conclusion.

Clarissa Dalloway, forever the “perfect hostess,” begins to crack when the Bradshaws mention the death of a young boy; the audience would know him as Septimus Smith (Woolf 45). Clarissa then goes up to her room and has a new enlightened perspective about life:

“Fear no more the heat of the sun.” She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away...He made her feel the beauty. He made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble. (131)

In this crucial scene, the audience watches Clarissa resolve herself to life again. Throughout the novel, the reader learns that Clarissa is a very performative woman for society to aid her politically inclined husband. She plays this role as the “perfect hostess” and plays it well, never letting her feelings dictate her actions. The only way the audience truly sees Clarissa is through Woolf's minute exploration of her consciousness. After Death is invited to her party, Clarissa is forced to manage the intrusion of her newest guest. The party suddenly gets shoved into the back of Clarissa's mind as “the story or action is [shown to] not [be as] important; it is the inner world of an individual [that Woolf is highlighting]” (Zámečnickova 37). She becomes acutely aware of how close Death is to her inner circle and must come to terms with this revelation. Death becomes secondary to life as Clarissa ponders what Septimus has done and how brave he was, taking life and living (or dying) for himself. Taking her life into her own hands for the first time, or at the very least the first time since her teenage years at Bourton, Clarissa descends the stairs and simply just was.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf masterfully employs the concept of time as a lens to explore the human condition, weaving together past and present through her innovative use of stream of consciousness and flashbacks. By blending Bergson's theories of chronological and experiential time, Woolf creates a narrative that transcends linear

progression, allowing readers to delve into the depths of her characters' psyches. Through Clarissa Dalloway's reflections and interactions, we witness how memories shape identity and how the passage of time affects one's sense of self. The novel's exploration of mortality, particularly through Clarissa's reaction to Septimus' death, further emphasizes the complex relationship between time, life, and death. Woolf's intricate handling of time in *Mrs. Dalloway* not only revolutionized Modernist literature but also provided a profound foundation for future authors to explore the nature of human existence as she reveals the beauty in the ebb and flow of a single day and the lifetime of memories it contains. These literary devices unveil the characters' past and present thoughts and emotions, providing a unique and innovative perspective on the impact of time on their lives during a period of global mourning and psychological exploration—and how beautiful that can be. ■

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## Student Biography

Alivia Ragsdale is a senior majoring in English at Sam Houston State University. She is involved with Sigma Tau Delta, the ASL Club, and the Elliott T. Bowers Honors College, and works as a writing tutor at the Academic Success Center. When Alivia was assigned her final project about the English Novel, she chose to study how Virginia Woolf uses memory to explore characterization in her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Having taken classes under various English professors, Alivia developed close relationships with them as they mentored her love of research. This led to working closely with Dr. Tracy Bilsing, a professor in the Department of English and Associate Dean of the Honors College. Alivia Ragsdale will graduate in spring 2025 and plans to pursue graduate school at Sam Houston State University. She hopes to research gender and queer theories and how they apply to different areas of literature in graduate school.