

The bells toll for her



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent. . . therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”—John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*The year is 1923. In the suburbs of London, Virginia Woolf sits down to write *Mrs. Dalloway*. The Great War has been over for five years, but its memory still haunts millions. More than nine hundred and fifty thousand young Englishmen lie in their graves—infinite bells, surely, have mourned these dead. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf echoes these bells through the constant striking of the hours. But the bells in Woolf’s work are not merely markers of time. Particularly in the novel’s post-WWI setting, they are a motif for death and its ineluctable approach. From the very opening pages of her work, Woolf attributes a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the bells that strike the hours. The protagonist Clarissa Dalloway, as she walks down the street, affirms “ a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense... before Big Ben strikes” (4). Clarissa anticipates the bells; and the passage immediately following reads “ There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable” (4). What could this description signify? In the beginning of the novel, it is perhaps difficult to grasp an interpretation. To approach the bells of *Mrs. Dalloway*, we must first study their three different aspects—and images with which they are associated. The first significance of the bells involve the unavoidable passage of time, which Woolf evokes through images that are—quite literally—striking. The bells are “ direct” and “ downright” (48), “ with overpowering directness and dignity” (118); they “ counse[l] submission” and “ uph[old] authority” (102). Woolf’s language is clear: the hours that toll carry the same note of certitude and finality as a hammer closing an auction, or a bomb destroying a target. They

<https://assignbuster.com/the-bells-toll-for-her/>

are direct, powerful, and “irrevocable.” Much in the same tone, Woolf associates this potent striking of the hour with death. When Peter leaves Clarissa house, he hears “St. Margaret’s. . . stroke of the hour”: “the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death,” and Peter imagines “Clarissa falling where she stood” (50). It is as if the bells fell Clarissa—or as if they toll for her death. Here Woolf revives the idea of the irrevocability of the hours; for Peter Walsh exclaims, “No! No!... She is not dead! I am not old. . .” (50), as if to fight the inevitable passage of time—the passage towards death. Frequently indeed, the idea of death surrounds the bells that announce the hours. The following passage, however, addresses death in a different way from the above: It was precisely twelve o’clock; twelve by Big Ben; whose stroke... blent with that of other clocks, mixed in a thin ethereal way with the clouds and wisps of smoke, and died up there with the seagulls” (94). Death, here does not evoke the striking image of “Clarissa falling” (50). Rather, its “ethereal” *mélange* with “clouds and wisps of smoke” suggests a more ephemeral representation of death: like the bells’ reverberations, fading away gently yet surely among the seagulls. Thus the second significance of the bells portrays death in a more melancholic light. It is under this light that “the sound of the half hour dies away” (103), and “the sound of the bell flooded the room with its melancholy wave” (118). Woolf evokes the sound and echo of the London bells that—here, instead of adumbrating the approach of death—induce the reader to “hear” an almost forlorn dolor. This dolor, precisely, takes on its full meaning in the novel’s post-WWI setting. Although the Great War has ceased its fires for five years, its survivors have hardly forgotten its horrors. For some unfortunate, besides, the war still rages—as Clarissa remarks, “the war was over, except

<https://assignbuster.com/the-bells-toll-for-her/>

for some.” Mrs. Foxcroft, for example, mourns the loss of her “ nice boys,” as does Lady Bexborough that of “ John, her favourite” (5). For many, indeed, the bells still toll poignantly. Perhaps the remembrance of the war manifests itself most clearly in the character of Septimus Warren Smith. Septimus fought in World War I; he has survived, but not without scars. To begin with, he suffers from a form of shell shock: an indifference to all sensations. For Septimus, “ the intoxication of language—Anthony and Cleopatra—ha[s] shriveled utterly” (88); “ Even taste... had no relish to him” (87).

Hallucinations pursue him, too: he sees ghosts of the dead, often of his good friend Evans who died in the war (70). Clearly, Septimus is a martyr of the War, and he must moreover deal with its aftermaths—namely, the visits of Dr. Holmes, the “ repulsive brute” who attempts to cure him of his war scars (92). Eventually, as all martyrs do, Septimus jumps from a window to his death. It is through Septimus that we remark the bells’ third significance: in tolling for death, they represent a relief from all worldly difficulties. In the first pages of the novel, Clarissa reads a line from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* that begins thus: “ Fear no more the heat o’ the sun /Nor the furious winter’s rages” (IV, ii). These lines occur in *Cymbeline* as a funeral chant; they address the character Cloton, who longer needs fear any “ heat” or “ rage” of the mortal world. In the same way, death protects Septimus from any further suffering. That is why, at his death, his wife Rezia hears the striking of six o’clock and remarks “ how sensible the sound was” (150). The bells announce death, but they are somehow sensible, even comforting. To conclude, then, the bells in Mrs. Dalloway are perhaps best described by the “ late clock” that rings “ volubly and troublously” (128). They are a motif for death and its steady advent, but the novel’s setting enriches the motif to

contain at several levels of meaning; thus when the bells speak, they are voluble and troubling. Perhaps the mysterious description of the bells in Mrs. Dalloway's opening—mentioned earlier—is founded upon the image of an air raid: the “particular hush” evokes the calm before the storm; then, “Out it boomed,” the bombs drop, and the “leaden circles” dissolve in the air, “irrevocable” (4). Death hangs in the air. Thus the bells toll, not only for the dead or Septimus, but also for Clarissa, and Peter, and all English who underwent the strains and losses of World War I. The bells toll for Virginia Woolf, too. As she wrote Mrs. Dalloway, listening to the hours come and go, one wonders if she envisioned her own death, to ensue some eighteen years later.