

The importance of time in virginia woolf's mrs.dalloway

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Modern English novel Theme: " The importance of time in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway" As human beings, we are unique in our awareness of death. " We know that we will die, and that knowledge invades our consciousness...it will not let us rest until we have found ways, through rituals and stories, theologies and philosophies, either to make sense of death, or, failing that, to make sense of ourselves in the face of death. " Attaching significance to life events is a human reaction to the sense of " meaninglessness" in the world.

Fearing our ultimate annihilation, we form belief systems to reassure us in the face of death. Religion provides us with elaborate rituals at times of death and faith assists believers in mourning and coping with the loss of loved ones. So without a religious foundation, where does one find solace in the face of so much pain? This is the struggle for Virginia Woolf, a self-proclaimed atheist whose life was shadowed by death from an early age. In the years between 18953 (when she was thirteen) and 1904 she lost her mother, her sister, and her father.

Less than a decade later, Europe was consumed by war, and public mourning became a part of her life. " Grieving started very early in Virginia's life, which might be one reason why her writing offers us such a forceful riposte that it should, or could, be brought to an end. " Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories profoundly changed the way we think about the mind and its subconscious workings. His work greatly influenced the way people understood mental illness and other social deviations. This is especially true

during the time that Virginia Woolf was writing these novels, when his books were widely read.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud presents the struggle between Eros (the drive for erotic love) and Thanatos (the appetite for death) as the forces that dominate human decision-making and action. He feared that without healthy outlets for our own sexual appetites, humanity would fall to war and violence, as Thanatos wins the battle. Virginia Woolf is a perfect example of how this struggle exists in the human psyche. Her early sexual invasions damaged her sexual drive later in life. She was often cold towards her husband, unable to feel any passion for him.

Her desire for death, then, may have been stronger, which would explain her preoccupation with it. Attempting suicide twice, and finally succeeding in 1941, Woolf was acutely aware of the shadow in her life. She, like Septimus the poet in *Mrs. Dalloway*, condemned herself to death. Responses to death are an important theme in Woolf's literature. Mourning is a natural and necessary reaction to loss. In our minds, we must put the dead to rest, even if they still exist in our memories. Freud had much to say about this subject in *Mourning and Melancholia*.

He wrote that it might be a response to losing a loved one, as experienced by the characters in these novels. It may also be a response to a threatened ideal (country, freedom, family) that may be experienced in time of war. We must, therefore, take into account that Woolf, at the time of writing these two novels, had lived through one World War. After World War I there was

much sorrow in Europe. Public mourning, as mentioned, is done on a larger scale, and includes despair, overall uncertainty, and confusion.

The Great War had shaken the world, leaving the survivors confused and uncertain as to how to heal the wounds and mourn for so many losses. Writing in the 1920s, Woolf was keenly aware of the mood in Europe, time for public mourning had now passed, and life continued, though radically and forever altered. The war had great impact on her writing, and on her vision of the world. “ The war had taught him [Smith]. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death...” Death was an ever present shadow in Woolf’s life, but insight could illuminate aspects of life that would have otherwise been overlooked.

Without religious security, the author (like the rest of us) struggled to deal with loss. Main part With the publication of Mrs. Dalloway (Woolf, 1996) in 1925, the modernist writer and critic Virginia Woolf released one of her most celebrated novels upon the literary world. Examining ‘ an ordinary mind on an ordinary day’ (Woolf, 1948, p 189) Woolf explores the fragmentary self through ‘ streams of consciousness’, whereby interior monologues are used to tell the story through the minds of the principal characters. Told through the medium of omniscient narration, this story about two people who never meet has no resolution and the characters remain where they started, locked in their own heads, in a constant state of flux. As a contemporary study of post-war Britain, however, Mrs Dalloway mirrors the fragmentation that was taking place within her own culture and society, and provides a “ delicate rendering of those aspects of consciousness in which she felt that the truth

of human experience really lay. " A number of themes and motifs are explored, but this essay will consider the representation of time within the novel.

For Woolf, time is a device with which she not only sets the pace of the novel, but with which she also controls her characters, setting and plot. It is also used to question 'reality' and the effect of that on the individual characters within the story as they journey through their day. As these different modes are uncovered, psychological time will be revealed and its impact on the main characters of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith will be examined. Although Woolf has rejected the linear narrative favoured by her precursors, in what she described as a queer yet masterful design, she does achieve a certain linearity.

The thoughts and memories of Clarissa Dalloway, despite darting backwards and forwards through time, move towards a definite point in the future - her party. Septimus Warren Smith, on the other hand, is stuck in a time loop, living in a past that he cannot escape until the moment of his death. Mrs Dalloway bears the hallmarks of a modernist text with its striking and experimental use of form and language. Woolf accelerates and decelerates time by way of the thoughts and emotions of her characters.

The speed at which individual paragraphs move convey the emotional response of the character to the situation; when time slows, the sentences are long and languorous, but when the mood changes the sentences shrink to short declarative ones. The kinetic mode is the tempo or speed at which the character experiences a situation and the opening of Mrs

Dalloway demonstrates how Woolf accelerates time to a fever pitch to convey the energy and restless vitality of the two Clarissa's: Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning - fresh as if issued to children on a beach. 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 plunged 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 was then) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen..." Mrs Dalloway is set on a single day in the middle of June, 1923, in London's West End. The time and place are fragmented by Woolf repeatedly plunging her heroine back in time to the summer at Bourton when she was a girl of 18. Hermione Lee contends that "the past is not in contrast with the present but involved with it".

This passage sets the scene for the dual themes of liberation and loss which are outworked through Clarissa's rites of passage. Woolf cleverly parallels two important times of Clarissa's life - her entry into womanhood and her descent into middle age - and establishes a link between chronological time and time of life: In the space of half a page, Woolf sets the scene for her two landscapes - a country house in late Victorian England, and a town house in

Georgian Westminster. The late 1880s, when Clarissa was a girl of 18, was “ a time of serenity and security, the age of house parties and long weekends in the country”.

The Industrial Revolution had, by this time, transformed the social landscape, and capitalists and manufacturers had amassed great fortunes, shifting money and power to the middle classes. Social class no longer depended upon heritage; indeed Clarissa’s own social heritage is never clearly defined. Born into an age of reform - Gladstone had passed the Married Woman’s Property Act and Engels had just published the second volume of Marx’s *Das Kapital* - at 18, Clarissa has an enquiring mind, and despite her apparent naivety, she is questioning and absorbs the different thoughts and ideas that mark the age.

Despite her naivety, the eighteen-year-old Clarissa is a vibrant young woman who is full of fun. She loves poetry and has aspirations of falling in love with a man who will value her for the opinions imbued in her by Sally Seton. Her bursting open the French windows and plunging at Bourton is a metaphor for her rite of passage from girlhood to womanhood, and she embraces the change, despite “ feeling...that something awful was about to happen. ” Life at Bourton was sheltered and Clarissa was protected from the decay of Victorian values; the boundaries set by her father and aging aunt, far from being restricting, allowed her a sense of freedom.

Bourton and her youth therefore represent a time of liberation for Clarissa. The present mode of time is one of uncertainty, where Clarissa’s understanding of ‘reality’ has been fragmented by the first world war, and

where Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin - under whom her husband, Richard, serves - has been in power for just three weeks; the third British Prime Minister in a year. At 52 years old, Clarissa's plunge into middle age is an ironic affair and the reader is given a sense that it is not the lark that she declares it to be but is rather a time for reflecting on the past.

Although she still has a questioning mind, she has lost her voice, and this is symbolised by Woolf's use of interior monologue. Her home in Westminster, where her bed is narrow and "the sheets...tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side" therefore represents a time of loss. As a young woman Clarissa had been avidly pursued by Peter Walsh whose marriage proposals she rejected on account of his stifling her. Marriage to Richard was meant to have given her some independence, yet the middle-aged Clarissa is like a caged bird, repeatedly depicted as having "a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green. This day is significant to her in that it represents her breaking out of that cage, her 'coming of age', and by buying the flowers herself she is asserting her independence and re-gaining control of her life. Despite the ordinariness of her day, Clarissa (in contrast to the feeling she experienced as she plunged through the windows at Bourton) feels that something important is about to happen to her and she receives the morning "fresh as if issued to children on a beach." The mature Clarissa has become compliant and her spirit and idealism have been tamed, her passion for life and love quenched.

This attitude reflects the spirit of the modernist age where there is a national lack of confidence in God, in government and in authority following the

slaughter at the Somme. Clarissa's party is her opportunity to unmask her real self to the world. However, she wastes the opportunity by indulging in superficial conversation with people who do not matter to her. This suggests that the real Clarissa has been left behind at Bourton; that the young woman plunging through the squeaky French windows, filled with burgeoning hopes for the future, is the real Clarissa Dalloway.

The only time we glimpse her as a mature woman is when she briefly speaks with Peter and Sally at her party. The most obvious representation of time in Mrs Dalloway is 'clock time'. Various clocks are present throughout the novel, including Big Ben, St Margaret's and an unnamed 'other' who is always late. How the character experiences clock time...is rendered by Virginia Woolf as a sensory stimulus which may divert the stream of thought, summon memory, or change an emotional mood, as do the chimes of Big Ben and St Margaret's throughout Mrs Dalloway.

Thus clock time is metamorphosed into feeling and enters consciousness as one more aspect of duration. Accurate to within one second per day, its importance in the novel can be in no doubt. It makes its first appearance early on in the novel as Clarissa leaves her Westminster home. Jill Morris asserts that: When Big Ben strikes, those who hear are lifted out of their absorption in daily living to be reminded of this moment out of all the rest. This is demonstrated by Clarissa who, in the middle of ruminating about her life as she waits to cross the road, becomes suddenly aware of: "a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense...before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour,

irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. " Not only do we anticipate the sound of Big Ben, but when " we hear the sound...we have a visual picture of it in our imaginations as well".

The musical warning is the ' Westminster chime' – originally the ' Cambridge chime' – that plays out before the hour ' irrevocably' strikes. Composed in 1859 by William Crotch, it is based on a phrase from Handel's aria " I know that my Redeemer Liveth". The irrevocability of the hour refers to the passing of time and its ephemerality. Once an hour has been spent there is no reclaiming it. This is linked with Clarissa's obsession with death – that each tick of the clock brings her closer to her eventual demise – and foreshadows her relationship with her double, Septimus.

Just as Big Ben strikes at significant moments in the book, so St Margaret's languishes: Ah, said St Margaret's, like a hostess who comes into her drawing-room on the very stroke of the hour and finds her guests there already. I am not late. No, it is precisely half-past eleven, she says. Yet, though she is perfectly right, her voice, being the voice of the hostess, is reluctant to inflict its individuality. Some grief for the past holds it back; some concern for the present.

It is half-past eleven, she says, and the sound of St Margaret's glides into the recesses of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring of sound, like something alive which wants to confide itself, to disperse itself, to be, with a tremor of delight, at rest – like Clarissa herself...It is Clarissa herself, he thought, with a deep emotion, and an extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling, recollection of her, as if this bell had come into the room years ago, where

they sat at some moment of great intimacy, and had gone from one to the other and had left, like a bee with honey, laden with the moment.

The bells of St Margaret's - the parish church of the House of Commons - symbolise, to Peter Walsh, Clarissa. At Bourton he had condescendingly prophesied that " she had the makings of the perfect hostess", and, indeed, Clarissa spends the entire novel preparing for her party. That evening he observes her " at her worse - effusive, insincere" as she welcomes her guests. The gulf of time has brought out the worst in Peter and he is still bitter about Clarissa's rejection of him, despising her life with Richard.

These feelings are forgotten, however, once St Margaret's begins to strike, and he is filled with deep emotion for her. The other clock is unidentifiable, a shambolic stranger following on the heels of the eminent Big Ben and elegant St Margaret's: ...The clock which always struck two minutes after Big Ben, came shuffling in with its lap full of odds and ends, which it dumped down as if Big Ben were all very well with his majesty laying down the law, so solemn, so just....

Woolf wrote of Mrs Dalloway that " the mad part tries me so much, makes my mind squirt so badly that I can hardly face spending the next weeks at it". One way that she deals with this trial is in her treatment of the late clock. It sounds " volubly, troublously...beaten up" reflecting the state of mind of the neurasthenic Septimus who " talks aloud, answering people, arguing, laughing, crying, getting very excited..." The ' otherness' of this clock defines its strangeness, with its perpetual lateness and shuffling

eccentricities being used as a metaphor for insanity, and therefore, for Septimus.

Just as Clarissa and Septimus never meet neither do Big Ben and the 'other' clock - they are out of synch and their relationship is notable only for the difference between them. As Clarissa Dalloway spends the day preparing for her party, so Septimus Warren Smith spends it preparing to die. There are allusions to his impending suicide and time of his death throughout the novel, and even his name - which means 'seventh' or 'seventh time' - implies that the prophetic relationship between the man and his death is controlled by time.

This was now revealed to Septimus; the message hidden in the beauty of words. The secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next...Dante the same... In his insanity, Septimus likens himself to Dante who travelled through the three realms of the dead during Holy Week in the spring of 1300. The seventh (Septimus) circle of 'the violent' is divided into three rings, the middle ring being for suicides who have been turned into rough and knotted trees on which the harpies build their nests.

His affinity with trees throughout the novel suggests that they have become anthropomorphic to Septimus and he looks forward to the time when he will become one himself. Cutting one down is, he considers, equivalent to committing murder, an action that will be judged by God. Septimus's contemplation of suicide is therefore a consideration of timelessness and eternity. He can condone the taking of his own life because he views it as an opportunity to take control of his destiny, to move into a realm of

timelessness where there is no death: A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped.

Septimus, Septimus, four or five times over and went on drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death. Septimus's transition from time to timelessness is finally accomplished when, in a moment of insane panic, he plunges out of his window and onto Mrs Filmer's railings. For Rezia this symbolises a plunge into widowhood and the beginning of a new time of her life.

Woolf understood that the most dramatic way of entering a character's consciousness is through time, as it is intimately connected with the 'moment of being' and the way that the character understands it emotionally. Entering Rezia's consciousness in this way and rendering time in emotional duration rather than clock time intensifies its impact and heightens the response of the reader. In clock time, the p of that moment of being is measurable in hours, minutes and seconds, but when experienced emotionally the past and future become entwined with the present and make up the 'now'.

It seemed to her as she drank the sweet stuff that she was opening long windows, stepping out into some garden. But where? The clock was striking - one, two, three: how sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering; like Septimus himself. She was falling asleep. But the clock went on striking, four, five, six, and Mrs Filmer waving her apron

(they wouldn't bring the body in here, would they?) seemed part of that garden; or a flag. She had once seen a flag slowly rippling out from a mast when she stayed with her aunt at Venice. Men killed in battle were thus saluted, and Septimus had been through the War.

Of her memories, most were happy. For Rezia, then, time slows right down at the moment of Septimus's suicide and it has a dream-like quality that mirrors her shock and grief. The sound of the clock striking six fixes her into the present, but her sedated mind wanders through fragmented images of a garden, a flag she had once seen when on holiday, the War. In her response to grief, real time is suspended, yet she is still aware that Septimus is dead, and she worries that his body might be brought into her bedroom. Instead, it is, figuratively, brought to Mrs Dalloway's party by the Bradshaws.

Clarissa's response to the news is to imagine how it felt, that moment of being that was Septimus's death: Always her body went through it, when she was told, first suddenly, of an accident; her dress flamed, her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud, in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it. Just as Septimus had imagined himself as Dante travelling through hell, so too does Clarissa have apocalyptic imaginings which are stirred by the news.

Her dress flames and her body burns as, in her imagination, she journeys into the eternal flames. The thud that she imagines in Septimus's brain mirrors the ticking of a clock and measures out his last moments on earth. The image has a profound psychological affect on Clarissa who suddenly

recognizes that she is like him - that he is her double. Her moment of epiphany enables her to both appreciate her life and lose the fear of death that has impeded her for so long. As Big Ben strikes for the last time in the book, the identification between Clarissa and Septimus is complete: She felt somehow very like him - the young man who killed himself.

She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living. The clock was striking. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Mrs Dalloway is an exploration of the human condition through the medium of time. Using a fragmented discourse that reflects the changing society that was post World War 1 Britain, Virginia Woolf involves the past with the present and suggests that time exists in different forms. In the external world it is ordered chronologically and she uses it to portray a vivid impression of London society life in the 1920s.

Its passing is marked by the great clocks of Westminster and the leaden circles of Big Ben are a constant reminder to Clarissa of the pulse of life itself. Kinetic time and clock time are therefore inextricably linked. Perhaps more importantly, however, is the suggestion that time also exists in the internal world as a 'moment of being', which Woolf develops through the medium of interior monologue. The principle characters - Clarissa, Peter, Septimus and Rezia - are defined by their response to time, and, as the novel draws to a close, there is an awareness of the past and present converging.

This creates an impression in the reader that they are reading a news report or a 'fly on the wall' documentary. Conclusion To sum up. Woolf suggests

that time exists in different forms. It exists in the external world, but also—and perhaps more importantly—in our internal world. Her description of the loud and rushing civilization suggests that we push ahead in the name of progress, without fully appreciating the moment. Through the character of Clarissa, Woolf challenges the usual definition of success.

Perhaps we need not leave some magnificent gift behind in the form of a building or a concrete art piece. Instead, maybe it is how we live our lives and our appreciation for the present that are truly more powerful and eternal. The small gifts we offer others, like bringing people together through a party, can touch people differently than a monument. Virginia Woolf's message about time should be heeded. Our rush to leave a dramatic mark in the world leads to further destruction. 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's 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.