

The importance of time in virginia woolf's "mrs dalloway" essay sample

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Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is a modernist novel, which shows new techniques to express a different point of view with regard to the notion of time. It is not without importance to note that the novel has no chapter headings. Nevertheless it is immediately obvious that the interest of the novel is not only in the form but also in the content. The action takes place in a single day of June in 1923 and what is interesting in the structure of the book is that simultaneously with the story of this single day, time is constantly flowing from present to past or to future. These flashbacks constitute the major psychological moments of the novel, most of them being represented by the stream of consciousness technique. This essay will explain how this flow of consciousness is interrupted by a chronological time represented by the strike of clocks. In fact, Woolf introduces a contrast between internal and external time. Moreover, the novel as a whole can also be considered as an alternate succession of two plots: the one of Clarissa and the one of Septimus. These two characters already show two different points of view over life and time: a sane one and an insane one.

Furthermore, it may be demonstrated that many different relations to time can be reflected through the various characters of the novel.

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. Woolf uses the flashback technique, which enables the reader to go from present to past or to future without having a

chronological order. In addition, she essentially points out this distortion of time by two means: first the traditional dialogues between the different characters and second the modern use of stream of consciousness technique. This technique shows the thoughts and feelings of different characters. Most of the time, in Mrs Dalloway, the narrator enters their consciousness to show us their memories. However, this perception of time is free and corresponds to the characters' mind. So, it allows the characters not only to think of the past, but also to visualize the future or even to imagine how the present would be if the past had been different.

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 love for Sally, which has been very important in her life. Next and most considerable thing is her past at Bourton. It becomes as relevant to this moment of June, as her preparation for her party, because of the come back of Peter Walsh. 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 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 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? – ‘I 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. (p. 3; my emphasis)

In a manner that she will sustain throughout the novel, the narrator conveys memory and present action to us simultaneously and ambiguously. “Which she could hear now” refers, ostensibly, to the squeak of the hinges at Bourton in Clarissa’s memory. Yet “now” implies the moment of her plunge into the street, suggesting a kind of reverie. The later phrase, “for a girl of eighteen as she then was” is similarly disorienting. It locates the time of Clarissa’s bursting open the windows of Bourton, but it also implies that, through her memory, she has become eighteen again. The “then” contrasts with the earlier “now”, but neither refers concretely to its own relative time. And finally, Clarissa’s thinking of Peter Walsh proves that the flow of thoughts is achronological, because she mixes the vision of him now and as he was thirty years before. Furthermore, she is allusive when she remembers what he said; she is trying to reconstruct the past.

It must be admitted 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. She is constantly thinking of this. In the flow of her thoughts, Clarissa shows the difficulty of this choice: " Now I remember how impossible it was ever to make up my mind – and why did I make up my mind – not to marry him, she wondered, that awful summer?" (p. 45) This demonstrates that she still does not know whether she did well to reject him; past and present are linked. And the climax of this reasoning is when Clarissa imagines how could be her present if she had married Peter: « If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day"(p. 51). 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.

On the other hand, we have the story of this June day. And during the whole day, Clarissa is preparing and preoccupating for her party, " she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party."(p. 5) All along the day she wonders who is coming and if it will be good: during the morning, Hugh Whitbread assured Clarissa that he would attend the party even if his wife was ill; when Peter leaves her home, she runs after him, yelling not to forget her party; in the afternoon, she thinks of Ellie Henderson that she has not invited to her party on purpose but who wanted to come. In fact, she is building her party in such way that all may be perfect. These

predictions are in contrast with the past memories; here it is a vision of the future that is represented.

Simultaneously, on the other side of London, there is Septimus Warren Smith's life. He remembers with his Italian wife Rezia the causes of his present madness and what has happened to him since the War. Septimus has been a clerk with literary hankerings, a courageous and capable young soldier in Italy, where he married his wife, while still stunned by the loss just at the end of the war of his closest friend, Evans, the officer in charge of his platoon; and he is now a war veteran suffering from delayed shell-shock. He is tortured by inner visions of Evans: " Evans answered from behind the tree. The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids. There they waited till the War was over, and now the dead, now Evans himself - . . . But the branches parted. A man in grey was actually walking toward them. It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed." (p. 76-77) This demonstrates that the vision of the past in Septimus' mad mind represent a terrible anguish. He sees Evans as a ghost memory. His past is constantly haunting his life.

Woolf not only uses the stream of consciousness technique to show the past life of the characters but she sometimes mixes it with dialogues. We can notice here that what happened thirty years before, the separation between Clarissa and Peter Walsh, is also present in the memories of the other characters. By Lady Bruton, as she has invited Hugh Whitbread and Richard Dalloway to lunch. When she suddenly mentions that Peter Walsh is back in town, "[a]ll three, Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread and, Richard Dalloway,

remembered the same thing – how passionately Peter had been in love; been rejected gone to India; come a cropper; made a mess of things; an Richard Dalloway had a very great liking for the dear old fellow too.”(p. 117) Woolf shows here the common memories of these three persons. She uses such narrative process several times in the novel: common memories are represented either by the different consciousness of the characters or by dialogues between them. When Peter and Clarissa talk, both remember the summer she refused to marry him, and at the party Sally and Peter sit together on a couch remembering the past. It must be admitted that psychological time is elastic and people can imagine or reinvent the past as they want.

Moreover, even if the notion of time has a great flexibility, Woolf inserts an external aspect of it 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 timetables. 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. These clocks ring the hours and doing so, they also cut up the flow of time passing. They mark the “irrevocable” present. That is to say that we cannot go backwards in present reality as in the memories. Through the bells motif, Woolf breaks up the narrative continuity and structures the novel. She brings us back to reality. As Elaine Showalter has pointed out in the introduction of my edition: “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." (p. XXX) This title depicts very well the theme of time in the novel, showing the importance of every hour. Nevertheless, Woolf has chosen to entitle the novel with a less explicit name: "Mrs Dalloway". But after all, Clarissa, as we will further see, is a woman who gives a great importance to time and present moment; she is also very representative of this theme.

The clocks have different functions throughout the book. The main as it has just been mentioned, is that the bells of the clocks structure the time. It emphasizes the chronological order of the story. It can be remarked from a general look onto the novel that all bell strikes show the passing of time and only some of them designate a precise hour: on page 22, it is eleven; on page 54, it is half past eleven; on page 77, it is a quarter to twelve; on page 103, it is twelve o'clock; and finally on pages 128 to 129, it is three. It may be remarked that the passing of time is irregular; the number of pages used to describe a certain amount of time changes a lot in accordance with the moment of the story. For instance, the moment from a quarter to twelve until twelve o'clock takes thirty pages and the next two and a half hours take the same space in the book. Some moments are more important than others and take more space in the text. Another factor of this irregularity can be the presence or not of stream of consciousness to represent thoughts and past memories. Generally, when psychological time is introduced, we cannot realise how much time has passed in the reality; we have the impression

that more or less time has passed. It shows the contrast between dream and reality.

Another main function of the clocks is to bring the characters and the reader back to present reality and to break up the flow of consciousness. When, after dinner, Clarissa is thinking of her daughter, the sound of the bell stops her thoughts and announces Richard's arriving. This bell interrupts the stream of consciousness to introduce the real present with the action of Richard's walking in, holding flowers. Another good example of this process can be seen on page 103: Rezia was thinking of Septimus' madness and of her life in general; and when Big Ben strikes twelve o'clock, it reminds her the hour of the appointment :

It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big Ben; whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London; blent with that of other clocks, mixed in a thin ethereal way with the clouds and wisps of smoke and died up there among the seagulls – twelve o'clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street. Twelve was the hour of their appointment.(p. 103; my emphasis)

This bell strike is very interesting, it breaks up abruptly Rezia's thoughts. Moreover, this hour is given a great importance : the word " twelve" is repeated four times and there is a long description of the long propagation of the bell's ring that dies up " there among the seagulls". This sound of mixed clocks is spread in a very extensive area and confirms that time is the same for everyone. Here, the strike of Big Ben creates a link between Clarissa's life

and that of the Warren Smiths. It is a public time, which contrasts with the more personal time of the thoughts.

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: first, there is “ a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable.”(p. 4) 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, five, six . . .”(p. 164). Here the clocks remind us that we cannot stop time; it 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.

In a general sense, the clocks serve as an example of the experimental time, in which the present moment expands as it is filled with meaning. Big Ben can be seen as an authoritative interruption in the process of life to force everyone to remember that time is passing. Woolf shows that the thoughts of individuals can be connected in a way that reveals a unity in human existence. The thoughts are not only connected by the sound of the Big Ben clock as it strikes the hour, but also by other external events in the world, such as the sound of a motorcar, or the sights of an airplane in the sky. Nevertheless, every character has its own relation to time and to the passing of time. In the memories of the main characters, it can be noticed how the

passing of time has been very important for some of them and not at all for others.

First, Sally Seaton demonstrates that time can change a person. As a young woman, enjoyed making outrageous claims and acting on a rebellious instinct that led her to smoke cigars or run naked down the halls. In fact, she was showing a lot of abandonnement and of openness. Nevertheless, when Lady Rosseter arrives at the party completing the gathering of those from Bourton thirty years earlier, she is not the same woman any more. As an older woman, she has surprisingly married a wealthy man and had a family of five sons. Peter remarks: “ what a change had come over her! The softness of motherhood; its egotism too.”(p. 205) ; she has changed a lot through the passing of time; she is not anymore the Sally from Bourton.

On the contrary, Peter Walsh seems not to have changed so much. He still feels young. He is in love with a young woman in India and “¢[e]verybody in the room has six sons at Eton,’ . . . except himself. He thank God, had none. No sons, no daughters, no wife.” He has not the same constraints as the other people of his age. Sally remarked that “[h]e looked younger . . . than any of them.”(p. 208) Peter feels freer than the others and still attractive. In the morning, after leaving Clarissa he goes to walk in London; he follows a young lady and pretends she cares for him. He fantasizes about sexual adventures as a way to feel younger. It would be absurd to suppose that time has had no influence on him, but the way he feels the passing of time enables him to live it better.

On the other hand, even if Septimus is also a man that has no children, he does not feel young however. He is an insane man who is constantly tortured by past thoughts and afraid of the future; “ It is no accident that Septimus breaks down completely as his wife makes plans for children of their own. Septimus shuns the future as he shuns death” (Ruotolo, p. 151). Septimus is afraid of future but he does not want to die; when he was on the window-ledge, he “ did not want to die. Life was good” (p. 164). In fact, even if he has an insane point of view of life, he loves it in every detail. When he sees that Rezia no longer wears her wedding ring, he understands that their marriage is over and gets nervous. As a result of this, he begins to talk to himself. However, opening his eyes, he realizes that beauty is everywhere he looks. A vision of exquisite joy invades his being simply by watching the quivering of a leaf in the wind and the slow flight of swallows. He can see beauty in every ordinary thing; it is his way to love life. Septimus is terrified by the ideas of past and future but really likes present. He is conscious of death and cannot look upon it, he wants to live the present moment appreciating all the beauty that life can offer.

Clarissa, the heroine of the novel, is the character that represents the best this love for life and for the present moment. As Septimus, she is afraid of the passing of time and is aware that death is the ultimate end of this progression. She is not very young ; she is fifty-two. She cannot have children any more. It is something important, because menopause is sometimes called “ the little death”(p. XXXII) of women. And to compensate this, Clarissa loves life and takes advantage of the present. At one moment

in the morning, when her thoughts turn to Peter, Clarissa wonders if he would think that she has grown older when he returns from India.

And just after this, she thinks of herself and of the importance of the present moment: “ Months and months of [this year] were still untouched. June, July, August! Each still remained almost whole, as if it was to catch the falling drop, Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there – the pressure of all the mornings. . .”(p. 40) Clarissa understands that time has passed, but also that there are still a lot of things to live. She is conscious that what is happening at the “ moment” is important and that every moment in life has a meaning. This feeling is visible throughout the novel and from the very beginning of it. In her way to buy the flowers for the party, she already seems to realise that every moment has an importance in life :

“ In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.”(p. 4)

For Clarissa those moments on the streets of London pass as quickly as they appear; they are not only an aspect of time but also the mind, which creates them. She is enamoured of the day-to-day routine; life is what she loves.

This idea of time reminds us of the well-known latin expressions : “ Tempus fugit” and “ Carpe diem”, which mean that time flies and that we have to

enjoy the present, or literally: to seize the day. Clarissa is a society woman and realizes this ideal by giving parties. During the afternoon, she comes to realize that her parties are so important to her because she loves sharing people's lives, she is amazed of the very essence of life, moment to moment, the simple pleasures of seeing beauty, and "[a]fter that, how unbelievable death was! – that no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every moment..." (p. 134). To fight against death, Clarissa gives parties to bring people together and thus, create human dialogue and life. Nevertheless, this is not so easy to realize because of the suicide of Septimus.

In fact, both plots join at the party, which is attended also by the specialist who had examined Septimus earlier in the day and who by implication is held responsible for his death. Clarissa is very unhappy when Lady Bradshaw tells her about the suicide of Septimus: " Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought." (p. 201) Clarissa herself thinks her party is a failure; she wanted to create life and now death comes to her party. But finally, the striking clock reminds her that the rhythm of life did not stop with Septimus' death; life goes on. And she returns back to the party. These parties represent time throughout life, even in favoured moments time passes and death is what waits for everyone.

As we have seen, Woolf uses different narrative techniques, which reflect a modernist treatment of fiction. The intersection of external and internal time in the novel shows the great complexity of time, as a theme. The new novelistic structure erases the distinction between past, present and future,

and also between dream and reality. A moment can be repeated, recapitulated or changed in the mind of the different characters. 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 apprehension 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.

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