



# 'MRS. DALLOWAY' - AN OVERVIEW

BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

Submitted By:

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LIFE IS NOT A SERIES OF GIG LAMPS  
SYMMETRICALLY ARRANGED; LIFE IS A  
LUMINOUS HALO, A SEMI-TRANSPARENT  
ENVELOPE SURROUNDING US FROM THE  
BEGINNING OF CONSCIOUSNESS TO  
THE END

-- Virginia Woolf

# Modern Psychological Novel

- Developed in 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Incorporated incoherent thoughts, ungrammatical constructions.
- Term first used by the psychologist William James in 'The Principles of Psychology(1890).
- Emphasis shift from external to the internal.
- The novelist intrudes between the reader and the story.

# Modern Psychological Novel (contd.)

- Inner conflicts, feelings and mental processes in a given situation reflect the characters.
- Events do not occur in chronological order, rather life is rendered in episodes and the reader has to fill up the blanks.
- Presenting human beings as they are, not as they should be.
- Characters do not move horizontally from event to event but are shown at a particular moment.

# Modern Psychological Novel (contd.)

- Facts become available through the consciousness of the characters.
- Multidimensional approach.
- Focus on the complexes of psychoanalysis.
- Condemned as obscure, confused, diffuse and illogical.
- Affected by new psychology that life is in flux, a vast fluid, not uniform and homogenous, but full of diversity.

# Modern Psychological Novel (contd.)

- Things are implied, not stated.
- Delineator and analyst of the modern soul.
- The purpose of the novelist is not only amusement and entertainment but to enlighten us about life.
- Value of the works lie in the questions they pose.



Virginia Woolf

# Virginia Woolf as an Experimental Novelist

- Use of Stream of Consciousness technique to write about the imagined inner lives of fictional characters.
- SOC was a literary technique pioneered by Dorothy Richardson in 'Pilgrimage', used by James Joyce(1922) and perfected by Virginia Woolf in 'Mrs. Dalloway'(1925).
- A special form of interior monologue, with a flow of thoughts and images without a coherent structure.



# Virginia Woolf as an Experimental Novelist (contd.)

- A special focus on the emotional and psychological working of the mind.
- Gaining access into the private thoughts of characters.
- An attempt to capture the total flow of the characters' consciousness.
- Story told through the impressions of the characters.

# Virginia Woolf as an Experimental Novelist (contd.)

- Created novels without a plot.
- Mental processes as the prime movers of all human activity.
- Shift from continuity of action to discontinuity.
- Complication of character substituted for complication of plot.
- Ordinary characters from every day life.

# Virginia Woolf as an Experimental Novelist (contd.)

- Disappearance of the author to bring the reader face to face with the working of human psyche.
- Set the mark by substituting reflection for action, psychology for character.
- Influenced by the works of Sigmund Freud.

# Narrative technique

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- Stream of Consciousness technique.
- Interior monologue and indirect narration.
- Presence of an omniscient and invisible narrator.
- Use of tunneling technique by which characters recollect their past.

# Narrative technique (contd.)

- Helps to provide a background and history of the characters.
- Connects the past with the present.
- A novel without a plot. Movement from internal thoughts of one character to the internal thoughts of another character.

# Impact of First World War



# Impact of First World War (contd.)

## Historical Background

- Written against the background of First World War.
- A global war.
- Lasted from 25 July 1914 to 11 Nov 1918.
- Led to mobilization of more than 70 million military personnel.
- Victory of the Allied Powers (France, British Empire, Japan, Italy, US and Russia).

# Impact of First World War (contd.)

- Formation of new countries in Europe and Middle East.
- One of the deadliest conflicts in history.
  - “Large scale conflict of industrial capitalist nations; new weapons... used for the first time resulting in huge human losses. Concerned Woolf a lot as she watched friend go off to and die in it” – Helen Osborne



# Impact of First World War (contd.)



# Impact of First World War (contd.)

## Setting of the novel

- Post First World War Novel (Also called the Great War).
- Written in 1923, 5 years after the war.
- Disenchantment for the survivors of the holocaust- social, physical and moral horrors .

“This late age of the world experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears”.

# Impact of First World War (contd.)

- Acute physical and psychic effects

“For it was the middle of June. The war was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft... that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favorite killed...”

# Impact of First World War (contd.)

- Feelings of forlornness, desperation and deprivation. Men emotionally and physically wounded and paralyzed beyond comprehension.
- Coexistence of social history and truths of life in imaginative fiction.
- Personal experience of Virginia Woolf and its impact on her personality.

# Life and works of Virginia Woolf

- Born in London on January 25, 1882 as Adeline Virginia Stephen.
- First mental breakdown after the death of her mother Julia Stephen in 1895.
- Second mental breakdown after death of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen in 1904. Tries to commit suicide by jumping out of the window.
- Moved to Bloomsbury.

# Life and works of Virginia Woolf

## (contd.)

- Began writing professionally and joined the artistic and literary Bloomsbury Group (best known members – Virginia Woolf, Keynes, E.M. Forster and Lytton Strachey), whose work influenced literature, aesthetics, criticism and modern attitudes towards feminism, pacifism and sexuality.
- Married Leonard Woolf in August, 1912. Had third mental breakdown.
- Founded the Hogarth Press with Leonard.
- 'Mrs. Dalloway' published in 1925.

# Life and works of Virginia Woolf

## (contd.)

- Another mental breakdown in 1941. Commits suicide and drowns herself in River Ouse in March 1928.

Note to her husband: “I have a feeling I shall go mad. I cannot go on longer in these terrible times. I hear voices and cannot concentrate on my work. I have fought against it but cannot fight any longer. I owe all my happiness to you but cannot go on and spoil your life”.

# Famous Works

British Novelist, literary critic, short story writer, feminist, socialist and pacifist.

## **Novels:**

- The Voyage Out (1915)
- Mrs. Dalloway (1925)
- To The Lighthouse (1927)
- Orlando (1928)



# Famous Works (contd.)

- A Room of One's own (1929)
- The Waves (1931)
- The Years (1937)

## **Essay:**

- Three Guineas (1938)

## **A collection of short stories:**

- A Haunted House (1943)

# Publishing history

- 'Mrs. Dalloway' was published in Britain by the Hogarth Press on May 14, 1925 and in the United States by Harcourt, Brace and Company on the same day.
- Created from the short stories, 'Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street' and the unfinished 'The Prime Minister'.

# Publishing history (contd.)

- When she first conceived the novel, she thought only of the character of Clarissa who would either commit suicide or die at the end of the party. Later new ideas came. She wrote in her diary, “I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity. I want to criticize the social system, to show it at work, at its most intense”.

# Plot summary

- One day in the life of Mrs. Dalloway in June 1923.
- Bitter memories of World War I crowd the mind of London citizens.
- Clarissa Dalloway – hosting a formal party – preparations for it.
- Mrs. Dalloway goes to buy flowers for the party.

# Plot summary (contd.)

- The Motor-car incident.
- An Aeroplane Advertising Toffee.
- Visit of her formal lover, Peter Walsh from India.
- Her husband, Richard, busy with meetings.
- Her daughter Clarissa has her own plans.
- Septimus Warren Smith, with his wife Lucrezia, going to see doctors – Mr. Bradshaw, the psychiatrist and Dr. Holmes.

# Plot summary (contd.)

- Obsessed with memories of Evans, a friend killed during the War.
- Septimus, a war victim, suffers from shell shock or post traumatic stress disorder.
- The callousness of the doctors.
- Septimus kills himself to escape their inhumanity.

# Plot summary (contd.)

- Information about the death of Septimus at the party through Sir William Bradshaw.
- Clarissa's restlessness. Retreat to the privacy of a small room.
- Identification with Septimus, admiration for not compromising his soul.
- The guests leave.
- Entry of Clarissa and the excitement of Peter Walsh 'For there she was'.

# Autobiographical elements

- Septimus' condition and Virginia Woolf's struggles with bi-polar disorder.
- Both feel that birds sing in Greek.
- Both attempted suicide by throwing themselves out of the window.
- Both were treated at various asylums.
- Both were victims to the antipathy of doctors
- Both committed suicide.



# Themes

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## **Mental illness**

The novel is a study of insanity and suicide.

Predominant death wish in Clarissa and Septimus, a sense of futility in life

“She had the oddest sense of being invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more of having children now...”

# Themes (contd.)

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“Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely?...”

“Oh if she could have had a life over again!...”

# Themes (contd.)

## **Existential issues**

- A satire on the contemporary snobbish civilization.
- A deep sense of isolation or inner-hollowness witnessed in Clarissa, Peter Walsh, Lady Kilman, Razia and Septimus.
- The possibilities and limits of communicativeness. Attempts to bring people together by organising parties.

# Themes (contd.)

- Richard's political circle and meetings – a reason for Clarissa's heartfelt loneliness
  - “ Like a man withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs... there was an emptiness about the heart of life' an attic room.”
- The imagery of death with Clarissa's constant “fear of termination.”

# Themes (contd.)

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“... She always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.”

- Fascination with the concept of death and the end of existence.
- The constant threat of oppression by social forces like Mr. Bradshaw and Dr. Holmes.

# Themes (contd.)

## **Feminism and Homosexuality**

- Clarissa as a suppressed woman.
- Sally Seton as an independent woman, Smokes cigars, runs down a corridor naked. Turns out later to be a perfect housewife.
- Clarissa Dalloway's attraction for Sally Seton "She feels about Sally 'as men feel' ”.

# Themes (contd.)

- Septimus haunted by the image of Evans, a friend and senior in the army.
- Both in love with a person of the same sex, repressed emotions.
- Both existentially insecure, one chooses life while the other chooses death.
- Lady Bruton as a representative of strong women who participated in politics.  
'Lady Bruton had the reputation of being more interested in politics than people; of talking like a man....'

# Double plot – Form and structure

- Two plots – Psychologically united and harmonized.
- Septimus as externalization of Clarissa's mental state – Need of spiritual privacy.
- Septimus as doppelganger of Clarissa.
- The two never meet but life at Bourton intrudes in her thoughts as the Great War intrudes in the thoughts of Septimus.



# Double plot – Form and structure (contd.)

- The suicide of Septimus due to the callous response of the doctors, though a courageous act, is a failure of society.
- Clarissa's marrying Richard – also another form of suicide.

# Time vs Timelessness

- **Clock time or mechanical time** denoted by the striking of Big Ben

## Broad timeline

Early morning

Clarissa moves out to buy flowers

1 1.30am

Peter leaves Clarissa's house

1 2.00pm

Septimus' appointment with Sir William Broadshaw

# Time vs Timelessness (contd.)

1.30pm

Hugh leaves for the house  
of Lady Bruton

3.00pm

Richard comes home with  
flowers

6.00pm

Septimus commits suicide

Early night  
to 3.00am

Clarissa's party

# Time vs Timelessness (contd.)

## ➤ **Historical time**

Background of First World War. The present time frame being 1923, five years after the war.

- ## ➤ **Psychological time or inner time** or what Bergson calls 'duree' portrays the inner self of the characters through their consciousness. The blending of past, present and future. Human interaction through experiences, imagination and memories. Method of flashbacks employed.

# Major characters

No less than 100 characters make their presence felt in the novel and most of them assemble at Clarissa's party.

1. **Clarissa Dalloway** – 50 years of age, wife of Richard and mother of Elizabeth. Organizes parties to fight her sense of isolation.
2. **Peter Walsh** – Middle aged, over fifty, suitor and lover of Clarissa, introduced through the stream of consciousness of Clarissa, rejected by Clarissa because of his possessive nature. In love with a married lady, Daisy, visits Clarissa after five years.

# Major characters (contd.)

- 3. Septimus Warren Smith** – A World War I victim, who suffers a shell shock. A victim of mental illness. Obsessed with hallucinations. Marries an Italian named Lucrezia. A victim of the callousness of doctors. Commits suicide, in a way makes an attempt to protect his soul.
- 4. Richard Dalloway** – Husband of Clarissa, a political figure, MP in the conservative government.

# Major characters (contd.)

5. **Elizabeth Dalloway** – Seventeen year daughter of Clarissa and Richard. Inclined towards and strongly influenced by her history teacher, Miss Kilman.
6. **Lucrezia (Rezia) Smith** – 24 year old Italian wife of Septimus. Joins Septimus in England. Artistic, home sick for her family and country. Bears the burden of Septimus' shell shock. Very supportive, though disheartened.

# Major characters (contd.)

7. **Sally Saton** – A childhood friend of Clarissa with an independent outlook. Bold and unconventional, smoked cigars, sexually attracted to Clarrisa as a teenager. Presently conventional, married to Lord Rossetter and has five sons.
8. **Lady Millicent Bruton** – Belongs to a family of Generals, proud but polite. Invites Hugh Whitbread and Richard to lunch for letter writing. Devoted to promoting emigration to Canada.



# Major characters (contd.)

9. **Doris Kilman** – History teacher of Elizabeth; German by birth. Dictates religious possessiveness to her. Frustrated and embittered, symbolizes over-possessive and destructive elements of religion, is despised by Clarissa for entering into her daughter's soul.
10. **Sir William Bradshaw** – Thoroughly professional, Doctor, psychiatrist, inhuman and callous. Satirised in the novel as a representative of the present civilization. Irresponsible, unable to delve into the psychology of Septimus. In reality, responsible for his suicide.

# Bibliography

- 'Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*' edited by Helen Osborne
- 'Mrs. Dalloway and *To the Lighthouse*' edited by Su Reid
- *An Outline History of English Literature* by W.H. Hudson