

CONSCIOUSNESS REPRESENTATION IN *MRS DALLOWAY*

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Abstract: *Virginia Woolf's legacy frames a rich collection of essays which reveal convictions and problematisations of issues concerning different aspects of life. The role of the novelist and the representation of characters are part of her approach, revealing consciousness as a key preoccupation of the writer. Mrs Dalloway, who represents the image of an upper-middle-class woman succeeding in preserving an independent spirit while living in a society with shifting values, reflects a quest designed by Virginia Woolf to express both a social critique of the postwar British mentality and a model of psychological survival through a critical acknowledgement of the changes that take place in the world. Focusing on the topic of identity formation in the novel Mrs Dalloway, this article aims to identify sources and devices used by the writer to create a character that represents a process of becoming. Inspired by the vitalist perspective of Omri Moses, the present approach considers modernist characters as transcending the label of fictional in the sense that they are instances of consciousness responding to and being changed by their internalisation of experiences.*

Keyword: consciousness; life; fiction; character; mimesis; vitalist paradigm

Published in 1925, *Mrs Dalloway* is highly regarded as one of the classic novels of literary modernism, alongside works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). The novel centres on characters, with Mrs Dalloway being the dominant presence in the narrative.

In her essay, *Modern Fiction* (1921), Virginia Woolf discussed the role of the writer and supported the idea that a writer should reveal the workings of the mind and life: “Look within and life”¹. According to her, “the proper stuff of fiction”² is writing about and creating an experience of life through narration. The writer digs through “a luminous halo”³ to find means of expressing the inward conundrum of life: “Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with a little mixture of the alien and external as possible?”⁴. In *Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown* (1924), she thus wrote that “If the characters are real the novel will have a chance”⁵. By realness, she meant a focus on consciousness and the intrinsic

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays. Volume Two*, edited by Leonard Woolf, London, The Hogarth Press, 1966, p. 106.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*, London, Hogarth Press, 1924, p. 3.

realities of a person as connected to their outer worlds: “she invokes the tensions between surface and depth, essence and historicity, in the concept of character”⁶.

Modernist characters are examples of consciousness explorations, and their evolution is a process where the Self undergoes a transformative change. Omri Moses discussed modernism and the modernist character as a representation of vitalism in literature. This source of development revealed characters as modes of being prone to change according to internalised experiences: “These characters think and act on the basis of attitudes that are not shaped in advance. In so doing, such characters make decisions that transform themselves as well as the objects of their actions”⁷.

Virginia Woolf’s short story, entitled *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street*, is the first portrayal of the character Mrs Dalloway, who represents the image of an upper-middle-class woman succeeding in preserving an independent spirit while living in a society with imposed rules and mentality. The central motif of the novel, the party she is organising, describes the character’s means to merge reality with a freed perception of one’s individuality: “If communal experience is the focal point of Clarissa’s universe, awareness of individual isolation, even alienation, from others is the key to her awareness of herself”⁸.

The character’s acute sense of sensibility reveals the role of cultural experiences in her life. Her revelations are closely connected to the acknowledgement of readings. The first model for Clarissa’s character knows by heart Shakespeare’s sonnets and enjoys living and perceiving life as a poetic line described as “divine vitality”⁹. Gabrielle McIntire observed Woolf’s poetic style and how she embedded the poetic sense into the character representation: “Mrs Dalloway murmurs, almost chants, poetry on her walks through the streets of London [...] This early Mrs Dalloway is highly literate [...] has opinions about Shakespeare’s Dark Lady, [...] quotes Edward Fitzgerald, jokes about Keats”¹⁰. The difference between the first model and the character in the novel is just a shift in focus, Clarissa’s awareness still being a result of her thinking that “reads” in a very personal manner the people and context of her life in London.

As Helen Southworth argued, “Woolf celebrated the social, artistic, and literary importance of London”¹¹. This social and cultural setting for Clarissa’s life and party means she became part of that environment, and she embraced it entirely:

⁶ Amy Bromley, *Character, Form, and Fiction*, In Fernald A. E. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf*, pp. 149-163, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 157.

⁷ Omri Moses, *Out of Character: Modernism, Vitalism, Psychic Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2014, p. 2.

⁸ Jacob Littleton, ‘Mrs’ Dalloway’: *Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Woman*. *Twentieth Century Literature*. Vol. 41 (1), 1995, p. 46.

⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*; Edited by Jeanne Schulkind, London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976, p. 148.

¹⁰ Gabrielle McIntire, *Mature Works I (1924-1927)*. In Fernald A. E. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf*, pp. 89-101, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 98.

¹¹ Helen Southworth, *Literary London*. Fernald A. E. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf*, pp. 227-245, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 227.

“in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London”¹².

The topic of consciousness, as connected to life and death, is the main focus in the novel, and the rich cultural references and imagery of the natural landscape contribute to the expression of the human mind as struggling to balance a sense of one's identity. The symbols of the circle and water foreshadow the subsequent reveal of the character's thoughts and feelings from the beginning of the novel. Clarissa's metaphorical plunge into the life of her childhood, at Bourton, describes an abrupt passage from life in the countryside to life in London. This abrupt passage is compared to the touch of a wave, which announces through its coldness the inner struggles of the character: “How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave [...] feeling as she did [...] that something awful was about to happen”¹³. Nevertheless, Clarissa enjoys her life in London and explores the city while connected to her sense of living: “For having lived in Westminster [...] one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive [...] I love walking in London, said Mrs Dalloway”¹⁴. Towards the end of the novel, Septimus' plunge into death mirrors Clarissa's mixed feelings and concerns about herself. The visual image of people sinking frames a metaphorical setting where water becomes a metaphor for Clarissa's guilty consciousness: “It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness”¹⁵.

The symbol of the circle is most recurrent in the novel through the references to Big Ben's sound. Its sound, compared to “leaden circles dissolved in the air”¹⁶, frames both the image of the mechanised time which passes irrevocably in a constant rhythm and the uncontrollable rhythm of the inner reality of each person. The first strikes of the bell evokes Clarissa's love of life: “First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. [...] In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp [...] the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses [...] was what she loved; life”¹⁷. The last strikes of the bell strengthen Clarissa's conviction that not even death can defeat the joy of life. Through his suicide, Septimus proved in a way that no external force can control one's feelings and actions: “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”¹⁸. This connection opens and closes the novel in a cyclical frame that reflects Virginia Woolf's representation of mimesis. Her technique was described as engaging an organic view, meaning that the unfolding of the characters' lives is shaped in a complete perspective only at the end of the novel, where the course of their thoughts and actions connect¹⁹. The recurrence of the

¹² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, UK, Wordsworth Classics, 2003, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

¹⁹ Anna S. Benjamin, *Towards an Understanding of the Meaning of Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway"*. Wisconsin Studies, 1965, p. 214, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1207260>.

symbols and images from the first part of the novel towards its ending were closely identified by Merve Emre as echoes in a recent annotated edition of the novel. These echoes reflect both Woolf's act of reaching the final version of the novel: "The end took her back to the beginning. She had handwritten the novel [...] It was time to type the novel herself. [...] Typing the novel enlivened the act of writing. It made it purposive and gratifying"²⁰, and her art of character creation: "Her method had found a way to unite the two, showing the continuity between the world people shared and the sane and insane worlds they created in their minds"²¹.

Concerning cultural references in the novel, the literary allusion to Shakespeare's play, *Cymbeline*, highlights the theme of death as a structural pattern throughout the narrative and in Clarissa's evolving perception of her life. The first recurrence of the verses parallels Clarissa's loss of identity: "She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown [...] only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway"²². In contrast, their last recollection defines Clarissa's contempt with herself: "The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him [...] Fear no more the heat of the sun [...] She felt somehow very like him [...] She felt glad that he had done it"²³. The qualia moment which describes her empathetic feelings towards the dead man reflects the intensity of the character's revelation. Clarissa no longer perceives death as a threat to life, but her life as connected to those around her and, more importantly, to her private being.

Mirroring Clarissa's struggle to balance the sense of her private self and its everyday reflection in society, the symbol of the tree becomes the following important metaphor, describing her changing consciousness and feelings. Her symbolic connection to Septimus, the character analysed by most critics as Clarissa's alter ego or double, reflects in the symbol of the tree: "he can never overcome his fragmented vision of the world, cannot conceive of a tree with roots; Clarissa shares this inability with him"²⁴. Clarissa's moment of revelation: "how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are"²⁵ is darkened by the harsh reality of solitude, since she does not addresses to any divinity, and relinquish, since her husband would go alone to Lady Bruton's lunch. The contrast between the previous qualia moment where she "felt blessed and purified"²⁶ and the later moment of suspense she felt frames this acknowledged inability to perceive a centre, a self: "She could see what she lacked. [...] It was

²⁰ Merve Emre (Ed.), *The Annotated Mrs. Dalloway*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021, p. LXV.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. LI.

²² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, UK, Wordsworth Classics, 2003, p. 8.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

²⁴ André Viola, "Buds on the Tree of Life": A Recurrent Mythological Image in Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway". *Journal of Modern Literature*, 20(2), 239–247, 1996, p. 246, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831479>.

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, UK, Wordsworth Classics, 2003, p. 22.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

something central which permeated”²⁷. Nevertheless, Clarissa’s perception of herself evolves towards contempt and acceptance: “She felt glad that he had done it”²⁸. In contrast, Septimus cannot overcome the traumatic experience of war and the subsequent traumatic behaviour of the people supposed to help and support him in the recovery process. He associates himself with “a drowned sailor on a rock”²⁹. The personification of trees, which wave at him in an aggressive manner, confirms his short-term optimistic perception of himself: “The trees waved, brandished. We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create”³⁰.

Even if Clarissa and Septimus do not meet physically, their consciousnesses are connected and revealed through Woolf’s tunnelling technique: “It took me a year’s groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by instalments”³¹. The “caves”³² which pave the tunnels of the characters’ awareness reflect the rich symbolic elements that frame Self-archetype images. Clarissa’s choice to marry Richard and Septimus’s adaptation to life after the war are just motifs setting up a narrative course of the characters’ lives, but the thread of their inner struggles is the central aspect expressed through the shifting focalisation of the narration.

The evolution of Mrs Dalloway’s character parallels the tragic destiny of her alter ego, Septimus Warren Smith. While Clarissa develops an increasing self-awareness, Septimus advances towards self-destruction: “for Septimus Smith, the experience of war trauma dissolves character itself into a flow of fleeting sensations and impressions, superimposed memories, and hallucinations”³³. Given the beginning of the novel, when Clarissa is over fifty, meaning the end of Erikson’s life cycle model, the stages of her evolution are devised according to the character’s recollected memories. The symbolic elements, such as water, the circle, and the motifs of sound and silence, reflect an image of the Self-archetype that is predominant throughout the writing. The particular motif of the flowers, which is strongly connected to the character’s awareness of independent thinking, relates to the moments of revelation present throughout the character’s life and, thus, merges with the cultural references that announce formative experiences.

The nature of the formative experiences includes natural, social, and cultural sources of acknowledgement that make visible the character’s self-awareness and her evolution towards new forms of self-knowledge. This evolution is anticipated from Virginia Woolf’s statements referring to this novel: “I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953, p. 61.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 60.

³³ Amy Bromley, *Character, Form, and Fiction*, In Fernald A. E. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf*, pp. 149-163, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 160.

work, at its most intense”³⁴. Developing the idea of sanity, I claim that the author shows how a person succeeds in preserving a sense of self due to the careful quest of the rules, mentalities and changing landscape of one’s social and cultural environment. Clarissa immerses herself into London’s life on a June day, against the background of a world that adapts after the end of the First World War. Cultural knowledge is a key factor influencing the character’s inner balance and struggles. The urban space reveals the changing values of a society where the citizens have to face new realities. The interaction with their environment is the key to overcoming the challenges of such a different life: “Woolf’s work [...] increasingly reveal a conception of public space as a site where individuals’ interactions with each other lead to transformations in points of view”³⁵.

Clarissa’s party is her way of interacting with a society on the verge of disappearing, and the motif of the party reveals how its organisation is the actual source of Clarissa’s free spirit. The beginning and the end of the novel open and close the symbolic image of the character’s self, which projects the key elements of her becoming. The natural element illustrates the symbol of the flowers: “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself”³⁶. The social element describes the event she is due to organise: “her party”³⁷. The main cultural element reflects the significance of the recurrent quote from Shakespeare, which highlights the character’s acknowledgement of her inner independence: “Fear no more the heat of the sun”³⁸.

The multiple references to natural elements and symbols of nature reflect Virginia Woolf’s perspective on literature: “Woolf’s metaphors all speak of a quest for origins [...] but most powerfully the sense of literature evolving from the natural world”³⁹. In the light of ecofeminist studies, Bonnie Kime Scott showed how nature was designed as a cultural construct by Virginia Woolf in her novels. For example, she considered gardens a territory that reveals the soil of early memories and paves the way to conscious acknowledgement⁴⁰. The natural world merges with the mechanised realities of emerging technologies in the novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Clarissa cultivates her first sense of awareness in her recollection of the natural environment at Bourton, her childhood home. Then, the culture of the city completes the process of her transformation. The motif of the flowers announces the evolution of Clarissa’s consciousness towards independent thinking, and her internalisation of London’s noises, sounds, and society enriches her perception of

³⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary, Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953, p. 57.

³⁵ Mia Spiro, *Between Public And Private Acts: Woolf’s Anti-Fascist Strategies*. In E. F. Evans & S. E. Cornish (Eds.), *Woolf and the City* (pp. 130–135), Liverpool University Press, 2010, pp. 130–131. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1gn6dr9.22>.

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, UK, Wordsworth Classics, 2003, p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 135.

³⁹ Jane De Gay, *Allusion and Metaphor*. In Fernald A. E. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Virginia Woolf*, pp. 197–211). Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 211.

⁴⁰ Bonnie Kime Scott, *Introduction*. In *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (pp. 1–12), University of Virginia Press, 2012, p. 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrm1h.5>.

life and herself. Nature and the natural elements remain constant in her experiences throughout London, and thus, a fusion between environmental, social, and cultural sources of perception takes place.

Clarissa Dalloway changes her perception throughout the course of her acknowledged memories and the context of her present life. Self-awareness reveals itself as a transformative journey, resulting in balance, even if it may be only temporary. Thus, Clarissa is a character whose life is transcribed as a continuous wave of rising and falling thoughts, feelings, and dispositions.

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