

TREATMENT OF TIME IN MODERN LITERATURE: MRS. DALLOWAY BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Virginia Woolf's treatment of Time in Mrs. Dalloway to analyze how the theme of 'Time' influenced Modern school of thought. It also aims to study the interdependency of memory, experience, sub-conscious and the self that constructs the Modernist discourse as well as story's narration. Mrs. Dalloway, considered as Virginia Woolf's one of literary masterpieces, holds great relevance under the umbrella of Modernist fiction. Brimming with the constructionist concept of time, twentieth century literature was undergoing major changes in its perspective and narration: especially in light of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis and Henri Bergson's concept of "clock-time" and "mind-time". Not remaining untouched by the contemporary spirit of experimentation with the concept of time, Woolf employs the literary technique of stream of consciousness in Mrs. Dalloway to capture her characters' total flow of consciousness- their thoughts and memories. To accomplish this technique she manipulates and experiments with the concept of time in her story: she speeds up, slows down or stretches time according to the duration of human experience. Alluding to Bergson's concept of time, that time is divided into two types- chronological time and psychological time, Woolf represents and intersects clock-time and mind-time in the story to give it narrative pace. Besides, the trope of memory is applied to move to-and-fro in time. In order to understand how Modern literature and philosophy perceived 'Time', this paper looks at Woolf's treatment of time in Mrs. Dalloway.

Key Words: *time, Modern, sub-consciousness, memory, psychological, chronological.*

Virginia Wolf is regarded as one of the most celebrated writers of Modern fiction and Feminist writings. *Mrs. Dalloway* is her masterpiece in regard of the aforementioned genres of Modernist novel and feminist text. The narrative technique that she employs in *Mrs. Dalloway* is "stream of consciousness", which is the flagship writing style of many Modernist writers including Woolf and James Joyce. This technique involves dealing with the "interior" rather than the "exterior"; the literary device tries to capture the total flow of a character's consciousness- his/her feelings and thoughts- as it comes to his/her mind without any logical breaks or punctuations. Besides, treatment of time is another important element that occupies and concerns this text's thematic structure. In order to understand Woolf's treatment of time in *Mrs. Dalloway* this paper looks at Henri Bergson's understanding of time as recorded in his 1889 doctoral thesis on *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the*

Immediate Data of Consciousness. The thesis elucidates how time is measured simultaneously by the clock and by the duration of experience as the human consciousness perceives it. This paper also shows time as divided into chronological time and psychological time and the manner in which both undercut each other in the narrative structure of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Mrs. Dalloway notes a day in the life of the title character as she prepares for an upcoming party. She visits the market in Westminster in preparation of the party that she is planning at her place in the evening- "For it was the middle of June. The War was over..." (Woolf 4). The text follows her through various shops she visits, people she meets, her old friends and the myriad of images she records on her way back home. All this while she reflects back upon her life, the people who were close to her in her youth, the choices she made and the sensations that arise inside her with the memory of these images. Her character-double in the story is Septimus, who is withering away with the passage of time owing to his mental state. He lives in a constant state of poignancy, self-dejection and despair only to end up his life by jumping off the window of his apartment. Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith never meet in the course of the story; however, they are united by the bond of emotional gloom and loss of "selfhood" in their respective life stories. They happen to exist at the same place on the same time and yet never meet. For instance, while Clarissa is busy buying flowers at the flower shop, a sudden loud noise from a car on the road attracts attention of people there. Clarissa is also present there, however, completely unaware that the car that drove by carried Septimus and his wife Lucrezia. Then the narrative voice suddenly shifts to the internal thoughts of Septimus as he reflects upon the airplane making letters in the sky. Hence, in the novel, the point of view keeps on shifting constantly drawing in its ambit everything- from the characters' inside voices to the London of the post-War June.

It astonishes that when there was even no existing phenomenon of Modernism, Laurence Sterne introduced manipulating time as literary technique in his eighteenth century classic novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Although, the inspiration for digressive narrative style came for Sterne from John Locke's "Theory of Association of Idea" that he talks about in his famous work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Acknowledgement to this tradition is very aptly registered by George Bluestone in his famous book *Novels into Film* where he says

But Lawrence Sterne saw a long time ago the essential paradox of the convention (writing in chronological time). If the novelist chooses to chronicle a series of events up to the present moment he discovers that by the time he commits a single event to paper, the present moment has already slipped away (Bluestone 49).

By the time Woolf began writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Time became a human constructed concept owing to the contemporary psychological and philosophical musings of Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson. Literary works produced by Modernist writers became largely influenced by the concepts of time and stream of consciousness; Modernist writers experimented with time, which was earlier believed to be eternal or immutable. Henri Bergson's ideas of psychological time, particularly, influenced the literature of twentieth century and changed the way these writers dealt with subject of time in their works. Even though it is highly debated if Woolf actually read Bergson, it is believed that his zeitgeist was sufficient to influence writings of major Modernist writers, including Woolf. The concern of Modernist writers was not the "durational lag between art and life" (Bluestone 49), as was for Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*; Modernism and its literary function became more receptive of time as experienced by an individual and began to investigate the non-linear qualities of psychological time as is perceived by human mind, irrespective of the chronology of events that occur. In *Mrs. Dalloway* as well there are many instances that follow the constructionist notion of time.

The story has no breaks or chapters; the purpose of chronological juncture is resolved by the striking of the Big Ben that reminds the characters of the inevitability of passing time and death. The presence of several clocks in the story- St. Margaret's, The Big Ben, Harley Street- set out a fictional pace for the story. Not only that, the juxtaposition of clock time with the psychological time of Clarissa Dalloway- her memories, musings and thoughts- completes the narrative as it reminds the characters as well as the reader about the unmarked flow of time. "The subjective lives of the characters are interrupted at times by reminders of the regular, objective, clock time, or by the external events" (Latham 105).

The opening scene in the novel itself throws light upon Woolf's treatment of time in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa experiences a flashback from the time when she was 18 which is induced by the sound of hinges. This illustrates how an external sensory stimulus incites memories of her youth in Clarissa's consciousness. Hence, reader travels back in time through the passage of Clarissa Dalloway's mind into a world which is composed of myriads of her memories and images.

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 here 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... (Woolf 3)

The reader is first transported into Clarissa's mind and closely follows her memories and musings then is suddenly pulled out of her stream of consciousness to witness the narrator's rendering of the present scene- "(Peter Walsh) He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which"(3). From these lines we can determine that Woolf's critical ability in maintaining dual discourses, interior and exterior, traces the inner fluctuation of thoughts of her characters.

Allusion to terms such as 'psychological time' or 'chronological time' holds a "Bergsonian" (Willis) approach to the concept of time. In order to understand Woolf's treatment of time in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this paper looks at Henri Bergson's treatment of time in his breakthrough 1889 thesis on *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. The novel embraces a "Bergsonian" sense of time through the distinction Woolf makes between clock-time and mind-time, which directly correlates to Bergson's notion of temps and duree. Bergson looks at time as divided into two different types- the chronological time and the psychological time. The chronological time, or temps as he calls it, is the one which is showed by clock. Clock time, he believes, is measured from an external perspective like the rotation of earth around its own axis or theradioactive decay- these can be counted as consistent, countable units such as seconds, minutes and hours. Additionally, clock time is quantitative and can be measured. This suggests that clock time deals with only that which is static, fixed and repetitive. However, "Duree", the psychological time, does not consist of material objects but rather of states of consciousness as the human mind perceives it. The real time of duree has no internal pre-conscious clock ticking out the seconds. It, as experienced within, does not flow uniformly; instead, it is bound up with, and manifests as, the feeling tone of our various internal states of consciousness. "In this way, it is meaningless to claim that time always moves forward at the same rate; instead, as we all know, experienced time is very fluid" (Barnard 28).

Another theory by Bergson that seems to have had great influence on Modernist writers including Woolf is of memory as a recurring phenomenon in human psyche. She extensively uses the tool of memory in *Mrs. Dalloway* to bring about the effect of flashback in time in the plot. Clarissa keeps on travelling to her past through means of her memory. As Woolf explains in her 1919 essay *Modern Fiction* "The mind receives a myriad of impressions- trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, incessant shower of innumerable atoms;" (246).

Bergson says that human "self" consists of the crust, which is the solidified outer layer. It is apparently stable side of the whole personality that is projected to the outside world. However, the real self of a person is the inner layers of constantly interpenetrating and relentlessly mobile self that exists below the solid outer layer. He establishes that the real link between the outer and the inner self is memory (Gillies). This idea seems to reverberate in Woolf's treatment of memory- the idea which

she crystallizes in *Mrs. Dalloway* by means of stream of consciousness. Reader not only looks at Clarissa Dalloway's consciousness from a distance but follows her thoughts through the medium of flashbacks and memories.

In the end, it is established that Woolf's treatment of time in *Mrs. Dalloway* holds a "Bergsonian" tone in making a distinction between chronological time and psychological time. The intersection of these two concepts of time maintains the narrative pace of the plot. Woolf experiments and manipulates with the pace and intensity of time to bring out the depth of human experience-as experienced by her characters in the story. Furthermore, Bergson's concept of the self and memory find significant space in the narrative framework of the story. The interdependency of memory, experience, the sub-conscious and the self, bound together by the authority of time, constructs the body of Clarissa Dalloway's character and the story's narration. Perhaps, Bose justly echoes that what Woolf "appears to be arguing for is a representation of the life of the mind, in all its vagaries, idiosyncrasies and indeterminacies, in its complexities and its fullness" (xix).

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