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**MODERNISM IN *MRS.DALLOWAY***

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**Abstract:** Modernism is a very interesting and important movement in literature, characterized by a very self-conscious break with traditional ways of writing, in both poetry and prose fiction. However, the most important literary genre of modernism is the novel. Although prewar works by [Henry James](#), [Joseph Conrad](#), and other writers are considered Modernist, Modernism as a literary movement is typically associated with the period after World War I. Other European and American Modernist authors whose works rejected chronological and narrative continuity include [Virginia Woolf](#), [Marcel Proust](#), [Gertrude Stein](#), and [William Faulkner](#). After First World War a lot of developments took place, new inventions opened up the mind of artists in the 1920s, one of them was Virginia Woolf, a very specific novelist. So, this paper deals with Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and the main focus is on the elements of modernism in this masterpiece. It is a modern novel which has also most of the features of modernism, or we can say that there are several ways in which one can see [Mrs. Dalloway](#) as a Modernist novel. The most dominant characteristic is the content and the narrative style. Virginia Woolf overstepped the traditional writing by describing characters not only superficially but also their inner thoughts. Rather than having a straightforward narrative with a beginning and end and a narrator who knows it all, with *Mrs Dalloway* we have several narrators, flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness style, and a totally fragmented story. Also there is a connection of the author and her characters; she putted a piece of herself in each one of them. This is how you can find about the author's life path and how her sufferings, mental illness affected into her writing. Thus, Virginia Woolf is considered an iconic modernist writer and pioneer not only of the stream of consciousness narrative technique, but of the use of free indirect speech, psychological as well as emotional motives of characters. Nevertheless, the unconventional use of figures of speech also makes a great characteristic and a symbol of her novels.

Stream of consciousness writing allows readers to "listen in" on a character's thoughts. This will make you explore yourself in ways you have never thought before. Specifically, in Clarissa Dalloway's preparations to host a party that evening Virginia Woolf records all her thoughts, remembrances and impressions, as well as the thoughts of other characters. There is no actual story, no plots or sub-plots, in fact, there is no action in the traditional sense in this novel, except from the "myriad of impressions" created by Virginia Woolf's new style of writing,

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**MODERNISM**

Modernism refers to a reforming movement in art, architecture, music, literature and the applied arts from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, particularly in the years following World War I. It was a revolt against the conservative values of realism, a rebellion against the previous Victorian, Romantic and realist trends, a movement that went a step further into a world of the unconscious mind and the surreal, generated by the psychological insights given by Sigmund Freud's works that changed the understanding of the nature of the self and psyche. In fact, the new ideas in psychology, philosophy, and political theory kindled a search for new modes of expression. Modernism offered a new way of understanding the world, since many people came to be disillusioned by the previous trends, on the verge of World War One. By extending the relationship between artists and the representation of reality, modernism implied a break with the past artistic conventions which created a literature of crisis and dislocation, desperately trying to shape the new world.

Bradbury and McFarlane describe modernism as "an art of a rapidly modernizing world, a world of rapid industrial development, advanced technology, urbanization, secularization and mass forms of social life" but also the "art of a hf world which many traditional certainties had departed, and a certain sort of Victorian confidence not only in the onward progress of mankind but in the very solidity and visibility of reality itself has evaporated".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bradbury and McFarlane ,Modernism 1890-1930, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, p57

As far as literature is concerned, the Modernist impulse is expressed by industrialization and urbanization and by the search for an authentic response to a much-changed world. Although prewar works by Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and other writers are considered Modernist, Modernism as a literary movement is typically associated with the period after World War I. The enormity of the war had undermined humankind's faith in the foundations of Western society and culture, and postwar Modernist literature reflected a sense of disillusionment and fragmentation.

Early modernist writers, especially those writing after World War I and the disillusionment that followed, broke the implicit contract with the general public that artists were the reliable interpreters and representatives of mainstream ("bourgeois") culture and ideas, and, instead, developed unreliable narrators, exposing the irrationality at the roots of a supposedly rational world.

For example, T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* (1922), a seminal Modernist work, is about the search for redemption and renewal in a sterile and spiritually empty landscape. With its fragmentary images and obscure allusions, the poem is typical of Modernism in requiring the reader to take an active role in interpreting the text.

Another important writer who marks this movement is James Joyce. His masterpiece *Ulysses* published in 1922, was a landmark event in the development of Modernist literature. Dense, lengthy, and controversial, the novel details the events of one day in the life of three Dubliners through a technique known as stream of consciousness, which commonly ignores orderly sentence structure and incorporates fragments of thought in an attempt to capture the flow of characters' mental processes.

Other European and American Modernist authors whose works rejected chronological and narrative continuity include Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Gertrude Stein, and William Faulkner.

### **MRS. DALLOWAY AS A MODERNIST NOVEL**

In this paper we'll explore the modernist movement in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. She was not only a novelist but also a professional literary critic in her lifetime, writing extensively and reflecting on her own process of writing and reading. It is Virginia Woolf who declared that human nature underwent a fundamental change "on or about December 1910".<sup>7</sup> The world of Virginia Woolf's novels is built around small moments of perception that the various characters experience. They are brought together both in space, by sharing similar experiences, and in time, through memory and conscious analysis. The result is a vision of many different lives lived simultaneously.

She expresses and puts these images and visions in many of her novels, considered to be real masterpieces. One of them is *Mrs. Dalloway*, a modern novel which has also most of the features of modernism. Created from two short stories, *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street* and the unfinished *The Prime Minister* and published in 1924, this novel describes a day in the life of its central character, Clarissa Dalloway on a June day in post-World War I England.

The central problem Woolf faced was how to organize the flow of perceptions and memories; she did not want to have chapters with titles interrupting the illusion of a spontaneous stream of consciousness. She considered having a Greek chorus speak at intervals to sum everything up; she thought about dividing the text like the acts of a play. Finally, she decided to mark off sections with a double space; in the British edition published by the Hogarth Press, there are 12 spaces, like the hours on a clock. The striking of Big Ben further serves to punctuate the narrative. A central motif of the book is the analogy between the hours of the day and the female life cycle – what we would now call the biological clock. Woolf places *Mrs. Dalloway* in the middle, and surrounds her with female characters ranging from 18 to over 80. Woolf believed that the omniscient narrator of the 19th-century novel had to be replaced by a narration from multiple perspectives as well; many points of view and many voices should be included. She was intrigued by the new medium of film, and her narrative technique is very cinematic, including flashbacks, montage, rapid cuts and panning between various characters as they respond to an external event, such as the airplane overhead (The novel is historically accurate in its references; the first skywriter appeared in London in August 1922.) Woolf preferred to treat the life of the mind and not necessarily that of the body. She tunneled into the memories and associations of each character to give them depth, and to bring the past into a single-day novel.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf tried to carry the stream of consciousness technique to its highest level of achievement by making it a completely artistic way of portraying life through the third- person omniscient narrator, an overarching narrator who knows everything and who has access to everyone's thoughts. The novel has a rigorous structure.<sup>8</sup> As we said above the entire action is limited in a single day of June. Clarissa Dalloway is the central

<sup>7</sup> Woolf, Virginia. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." *Collected Essays*. Ed. Leonard Woolf. Vol. 1. London: Hogarth, 1966. p. 319-337.

<sup>8</sup> Marina, Alina "Modern Characteristics in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*" <http://www.diacronia.ro/ro/indexing/details/A14567/pdf>

character, but the action is presented mainly through the minds of other people that surround her, without any reference to time or space. The novel seems to be more concerned with the past of the characters and their consciousness than with the things that take place that day except things such as Mrs. Dalloway's party, her shopping, the death of Septimus Warren Smith, and other things that do take place on the course of the day.

The method of presentation is different. It is not a simple description. The reader has to move through Clarissa's mind to the days of her early youth, for example, a period she spent at home when she met Peter Walsh:

*But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable, and when it came to that scene in the little garden by the fountain, she had to break with him or they would have been destroyed, both of them ruined, she was convinced; though she had borne about for years like an arrow sticking to her heart the grief, the anguish: and then the horror of the moment when someone told her at a concert that he had married a woman met on the boat going to India! Never should she forget all that. Cold, heartless, a prude, he called her. Never could she understand how he cared.* (Woolf, 2003, p. 10)

The same investigation has to be done in the case of Peter Walsh who has come to visit Clarissa after some years:

*"And how are you?" said Peter Walsh, positively trembling; taking both her hands; kissing both her hands. She's grown older, he thought sitting down. I shan't tell her anything about it, he thought, for she's grown older. She is looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him, though he had kissed her hands.* (Woolf, 2003, p. 46)

The reader finds out not only about the character of Clarissa, but also about a group of people who are related to her. Each of them meets Mrs. Dalloway in the course of this particular day in a way or another. Either she thinks of them or they think of her or they simply meet in London:

*But Miss Kilman did not hate Mrs. Dalloway. Turning her large gooseberry-coloured eyes upon Clarissa, observing her small pink face, her delicate body, her air of freshness and fashion, Miss Kilman felt, Fool! Simpleton! You who have known neither sorrow nor pleasure; who have trifled your life away! And there rose in her an overmastering desire to overcome her; to unmask her. If she could have felled her it would have eased her. But it was not the body; it was the soul and its mockery that she wished to subdue; make feel her mastery. If only she could make her weep; could ruin her; humiliate her; bring her to her knees crying, You are right! But this was God's will, not Miss Kilman's. It was to be a religious victory. So she glared; so she glowered.* (Woolf, 2003, p. 140)

Thus sometimes the reader stands still in time and moves from one character to another, and at other times, the reader stands still in space, that is, in the mind of a particular character and moves backward and forward in his consciousness. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf escapes from the limitations of chronological order by using the interior monologue, a form of the direct style that inserts into the text the character's plan: *Remember my party, remember my party, said Peter Walsh as he stepped down the street, speaking to himself rhythmically, in time with the flow of the sound, the direct downright sound of Big Ben striking the half-hour. (The leaden circles dissolved in the air.) Oh these parties, he thought; Clarissa's parties.* (Woolf, 2003, p. 55)

It is to be mentioned the fact that unlike James Joyce, Virginia Woolf doesn't recreate the stream of consciousness of her characters in a direct manner, but in a way that is reported. The author is always present in her novels as an impersonal narrator, who, as a matter of fact, represents the central consciousness that keeps control of the story. Such phrases as: she thought, he thought, she walked on, thinking about this or that, represent the narrator's own marks, a narrator who often speaks directly, but seldom in the first person: *There was Regent's Park. Yes. As a child he had walked in Regent's Park —odd, he thought, how the thought of childhood keeps coming back to me — the result of seeing Clarissa, perhaps; for women live much more in the past than we do, he thought.* (Woolf, 2003)

Another element that involves the author's presence is when one hears a clock striking a particular hour. This is the moment when the author is going to shift from one character to another, either in space or in time:

*The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night!* (Woolf, 2003, p. 207)

The use of metaphors, of different images is also a specific characteristic that belongs to Virginia Woolf's novels. The landscape represents the type of description that has a relative independence to the narrative and which provides a break, a slowdown of the story. What is specific to the landscape is fact that it can be moved from one text to another or even from one author to another without changing the course of the narration:

*A puff of wind (in spite of the heat, there was quite a wind) blew a thin black veil over the sun and over the Strand. The faces faded; the omnibuses suddenly lost their glow. For although the clouds were of mountainous white so that one could fancy hacking hard chips off with a hatchet, with broad golden slopes, lawns of celestial pleasure gardens, on their flanks, and had all the appearance of settled habitations assembled for the conference of gods*

above the world, there was a perpetual movement among them. Signs were interchanged, when, as if to fulfil some scheme arranged already, now a summit dwindled, now a whole block of pyramidal size which had kept its station inalterably advanced into the midst or gravely led the procession to fresh anchorage. Fixed though they seemed at their posts, at rest in perfect unanimity, nothing could be fresher, freer, more sensitive superficially than the snow-white or gold-kindled surface. (Woolf, 2003, p. 155)

It is necessary to mention that the unconventional use of the figures of speech creates particular symbols. Some of the most important symbols that appear in Virginia Woolf novels, in *Mrs. Dalloway* as well, are represented by the tree and the flower images. The variety of colors and the beauty of flowers suggest emotions and feelings that make the difference between characters. They mark Clarissa's and Septimus' souls. Another important symbol in *Mrs. Dalloway* is represented by waves and water which almost always suggest the possibility of extinction or death. The narrative structure of the novel itself suggests fluidity. A character's thoughts appear to intensify and then fade away into another's, much like waves. Such an example of communion between the human soul and nature is to be found in the following excerpt:

*Going and coming, beckoning, signalling, so the light and shadow which now made the wall grey, now the bananas bright yellow, now made the Strand grey, now made the omnibuses bright yellow, seemed to Septimus Warren Smith lying on the sofa in the sitting-room; watching the watery gold glow and fade with the astonishing sensibility of some live creature on the roses, on the wall-paper. Outside the trees dragged their leaves like nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room and through the waves came the voices of birds singing. Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more.* (Woolf, 2003, p. 155)

Then we have identity, a constant preoccupation of modernists is cast in a different light. In author's view the self depends on the other but it is separated from it. Woolf envisions an allegorical struggle between Clarissa Dalloway's comic celebration of life and the tragic death-dealing forces that drive Septimus Smith to suicide. Another technique which helps the novelist to merge interior and exterior time is repetition; for example Clarissa, Septimus and Peter Walsh all reciting lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, and her characters are united by the constant use of memory. The characters are presented in their search for finding their own identities and they sense, experience and think rather than act.

## CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* plays up the stream of consciousness while emphasizing the uniqueness of the characters, creating a web of connection between them, which makes it one of the most modern fiction novels out there. Instead of describing the characters from outside, only superficially, like in the traditional novels, Virginia Woolf unfolds her characters as thinking individuals in constant evolution, which is a great characteristic of modernism. Like all the other modernist writers, Virginia Woolf was influenced by the advancement of psychology and the various theories it had generated and all the characters' thoughts are vividly presented in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Characters are revealed from different points of view, the technique of multiple narrative points of view being another characteristic of modernist literature. It is the reader who reconstructs the final picture of these characters and he or she is involved in this dynamic presentation instead of being a mere spectator. The distinction between direct and indirect speech is blurred. One can get lost while reading it but in the meantime who would not like something not ordinary, but different. Every each of us at some point in life goes through a rough time, and we all search for ways to cope best with them, for Woolf writing was her escape from reality, and maybe for you it can be by reading this novel. Beside the connection mentioned earlier, the reader can find oneself in the book, whether in a character, or maybe in just a descriptive paragraph of life, city of London, or in an emotion, a feeling. All this makes the novel even more attractive..

To sum up, this novel shows that human consciousness is never single and knowable, and most importantly, people are not fixed entities that can be understood by an external observer, so that the gap between subjective experience and the objective world seems unbridgeable. Even though it was written long time ago, and every year there is an evolution going around the world, this novel it adopts all times, it is a timeless book, since, what is worth to be mentioned is that everything she wrote back in 1925 is still relevant today.

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