

## MODERNISM AND VIRGINIA WOOLF’S NOVEL MRS.DALLOWAY

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*ABSTRACT: AT THE TIME WHEN MODERNISM APPEARED, IT OFFERED A NEW WAY OF UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD, MANY PEOPLE BEING 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. LIKE EZRA POUND, T.S.ELIOT AND JAMES JOYCE VIRGINIA WOOLF IS CONSIDERED TO BE A CENTRAL FIGURE OF MODERNISM. VIRGINIA WOOLF IS ALSO REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE FEATURE OF SELF-REFLEXIVITY WHICH IS INTRINSIC TO MODERNISM AS 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. IN MRS.DALLOWAY VIRGINIA WOOLF CREATES A MODERN NOVEL WHICH HAS ALSO MOST OF THE FEATURES OF MODERNISM. 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, NO ACTION IN THE TRADITIONAL SENSE, NOTHING ACTUALLY “HAPPENS” IN THIS NOVEL, APART FROM THE “MYRIAD OF IMPRESSIONS” CREATED BY VIRGINIA WOOLF’S NEW STYLE OF WRITING, AS OPPOSED TO THE TRADITIONAL ONE.”*

### **Introduction**

Modernism ,rebellng against the previous Victorian, Romantic and realist trends in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century took the movement a step further into a world of the unconscious mind and the surreal generated by the psychological insights given by Sigmund Freud’s works who changed the understanding of the nature of the self and psyche..Another influential thinker of the 1920ies was Henry Louis Bergson and in his view intuition and immediate experience is more significant than rational science as the basis for understanding reality. The concepts he used were memory, interior time, exterior time and intuition, memory providing the link of the past to the present. 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.

In their book entitled *Modernism 1890-1930*, 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 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”. [1] It means that modernism implies a break from the tradition, referring to some sort of discontinuity, treating characters as “thinking” individuals, emphasizing the unconscious rather the outer, visible self. The substance of a literary work characterized as “modern” is formed by imagination and internal thought processes and plot becomes a collection of incidents and their effect on the individual .

As Deborah Parsons argues in her book entitled *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* it is hard to refer to Modernism as a strict period in literature “because modernism connotes a cultural sensibility rather than a particular period in time and it is not simply interchangeable with strictly historical references such as “the early twentieth century” or “the 1920s”, even though it overlaps with them. The label “high modernism” ,as she further notes, refers specifically to the canonical account of Anglo-American literary experimentation between the world wars, characterized by a turn away from direct modes of representation towards greater abstraction and aesthetic impersonality and self-reflexivity. [2] These characteristics are to be found in such writers as Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf who are considered to be central figures of Modernism. Virginia Woolf is also representative for the feature of self-reflexivity which is intrinsic to Modernism as 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.

### ***Mrs. Dalloway and the Features of Modernism***

In *Mrs. Dalloway* Virginia Woolf creates 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. According to Harold Bloom, in *Clarissa Dalloway*, personality is one of the main underlying themes of Virginia Woolf’s fiction:

“Early in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, he says, Clarissa Dalloway has a private searching moment when she examines her image in the mirror. There she sees a face distinctively” pointed, dartlike definite” the familiar face, composed and tense, that her mirror reflected “many million times”. This clearly focused image represents a unified and static self, the person she can produce wherever she needs a recognizable social mask.

Her social image conceals” incompatible ”aspects of her personality which could be refracted into divergent and contradictory images. Each of the other characters sees only one of these incompatible aspects and takes this to be her total personality. Thus, as the novel progresses, the early static image in the mirror gives way to a series of shifting and contradictory views of Mrs. Dalloway, and her identity expands to encompass all the divergent images while remaining unencompassed by them”. [3]

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, no action in the traditional sense,

nothing actually "happens" in this novel, apart from the "myriad of impressions" created by Virginia Woolf's new style of writing, as opposed to the traditional one."Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day",she says in her essay, *Modern Fiction*."The mind receives a myriad impressions-trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpest of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old...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" [4]

Mrs.Dalloway depicts a rapidly changing society and its narration reflects these changes. In Jane Marcus's view, expressed in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*" Mrs.Dalloway offers a scathing indictment of the British class system and a strong critique of the patriarchy. The work's social satire takes much of its force from ironic patterns of mythic reference that allow the fusion of dramatic models from Greek tragedy and from the Christian liturgy. Woolf envisions an allegorical; struggle between good and evil-between Clarissa Dalloway's comic celebration of life and the tragic death-dealing forces that drive Septimus Smith to suicide".[5]

The constant use of flashbacks and memory are the techniques by which Virginia Woolf creates interior time. The image of Big Ben at the beginning of a new chapter signals the presence of external reality. The image of the city is not static or lifeless, it is full of cars, buses and crowds of people living their lives simultaneously.

Identity, a constant preoccupation of modernists is cast in a different light. In Virginia Woolf's view the self depends on the other but it is separated from it. Ephemeral, elusive and intangible, true identity is impossible to capture.

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 feel, experience and think rather than act.It is obvious that the writer does not narrate the story as her predecessors did and the technique she uses is common to many Modernist writers and it is called the stream of consciousness technique. It consists of recording the thoughts of the characters, in a continuous flow and without any apparent connection. But as Dorothy Parsons notes, "these interconnections might be framed, at their simplest, by a shared occurrence or spatial environment, such as the aeroplane, the prime-minister's car and the chiming of Big Ben that momentarily draw the attention of disparate figures in the city streets, but they are also developed through patterns of common and recurring mental images and phrases that serve to link even characters who never meet, such as Clarrisa and the shell-shocked Septimus Smith.

In John R.Maze's book entitled *Virginia Woolf: Feminism, Creativity and Unconscious* the author states that in Virginia Woolf's novels "there are mysterious pages that cannot be explained rationally by anything else in the text, and about which Orthodox literary criticism can say nothing informative .The limitation derives from the currently fashionable principle forbidding interpretation of anything in the text by reference to anything not in it. Such passages can be illuminated by reference to the author's life history and unconscious mental life, insofar as that can be inferred from other, independent, evidence. Psychoanalysis, for its part, can benefit because the mental mechanisms involved

in creativity are laid out for inspection on the printed page, rather than glimpsed in the analysis of confused associations to a dream”[6]

This is central to Woolf’s method of characterization, by which a figure is illuminated by the external perceptions of others as much as their own internal consciousness, but also to her “conception of identity more generally”(p76). Search for identity is emblematic for this novel, Clarissa Dalloway trying to reconcile her public and private self and Septimus Smith failing to do so and finally committing suicide. When Clarissa hears about Septimus Smith’s death at her party, she identifies with him:”She felt somehow very like him-The young man who had killed himself. She felt glad he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living (Virginia Woolf, Mrs.Dalloway)Most of the novel centers around Clarissa’s thoughts about the past, mainly when she is thinking whether she would be with Peter or with her husband,her rejection of Peter’s proposal of marriage influencing all his later thoughts and actions.Stream of consciousness is also used to record Septimus’ thoughts about death and the war.

As narration is reflected in the mind of one character or another, it is often dreamlike and fragmented. There is no narrator to tell a coherent and organized story and the narration sounds very close to the actual thought process taking place in an individual’s head. In spite of the fact that there are two significant events occurring in the story(Septimus’s suicide and Peter Walsh’s return), there is no real plot and the events can be included in the category of the everyday or the un-extraordinary. According to Harold Bloom, Clarissa Dalloway resembles such characters as Moll Flanders, Emma Woodhouse, Catherine Earnshaw and Dorothea Brook. ”Like Moll and the others”, he says” Mrs.Dalloway is enmeshed in a world determined by money and class and must struggle for a self-definition that in part accepts and in part defies those determinants. From Moll to *Mrs.Dalloway*, then, we can trace the career of the mercantile world view; what we see is the bourgeois mind encountering its own fatal limitations. For Moll, an early version of the bourgeois mind’s confidence in itself, the world seems limitless and open to conquest; she exults in her freedom and power. For Clarissa Dalloway, however, the world has shrunk and become brittle; she senses confinement and impasse, and her struggle for self-definition borders on hysteria and suicide. The history of the bourgeois mind is then, a history of diminishment, of encounter with dark ambiguities and dismay”[7]

### **Conclusions:**

Instead of delineating the characters from outside, superficially, like in the traditional novels Virginia Woolf unfolds her characters as thinking individuals in constant evolution. 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 view-points , the technique of multiple narrative points of view being another characteristic of modernist literature. Finally, 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 and Virginia Woolf alternates her presentation between omniscient description, indirect interior monologue and soliloquy.

## REFERENCES

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