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Looking for *Mrs Dalloway*

Epistemological questions
in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

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Abstract

This essay examines the philosophical questions posed in Virginia Woolf's famous novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) set in London in the aftermath of World War I. In her unique tone and poetic aesthetics, Woolf deals with questions about war and its aftermaths, evil and oppressive power, time and temporality, duality of life, fear of suffering and death, sacrifice and suicide but also, most importantly, love of life. By using a chorus of voices presenting the story through their inner monologues and streams consciousness, Woolf supports the theory of relativity that nothing can exist on its own, but only in relation to something else. There is no absolute truth, just a number of stories.

Key-words: philosophical, relativism, aftermaths of the war, oppression, dichotomy, fear of living and fear of dying, suicide and revival

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Introduction

Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) is like an impressionistic painting. The thin, vivid and visible brush strokes in an open composition create her own subjective impression of reality rather than the objective copy of it. The traditional style of prose narrative often involved an omniscient narrator explaining and guiding the reader through the story. Woolf was interested in achieving vividness in her work and to evoke subjective and sensory impressions rather than presenting an objective and absolute reality. She wanted to go beneath the surface of the exterior reality and illustrate how the characters experience this reality. By presenting their interior reality in relation to the exterior reality, Woolf wanted to create a more complete representation of life. The constant shift of focus between the exterior reality and how this reality is experienced is Woolf's way of conveying life.

In order to fully understand the complexity of the novel, readers have to see it "in its full historical matrix" as Christopher Herbert puts it (198). *Mrs Dalloway* is set in London in the aftermath of the cruel World War I. This war, then often presented as a war fought to save civilisation, destroyed people's trust in society and left them disillusioned and devastated. Unmistakably, Woolf skilfully integrates a strong socio-political critique in her writing of the novel, never overtly presented, but subtly distributed within her eloquent prose and experimental narrative technique. As David Bradshaw puts it in his essay *The Socio-Political Vision of the Novels*, "Woolf's radical critique [...] is subtly persuasive, never bluntly didactic [...] we often feel the reach and intensity of Woolf's sociopolitical vision, but never the push of her hand" (191).

Mrs Dalloway is a seemingly eventless story, taking place in one single day in June. Clarissa Dalloway is on her way to buy some flowers for the party she is hosting the same evening. However, beneath the surface of an ordinary day for an ordinary woman, there is an entirely different drama unravelling. What Woolf offers the readers, through her style and narrative technique, is a more profound and complex view of how reality is experienced. Woolf exposes the characters by revealing their inner monologues and emotions. Consequently, by letting a number of different characters' voices being heard, Woolf emphasises that everyone lives in a world of his or her own and that everything that occurs in the narrative can be seen

from different perspectives. Moreover, by abandoning the omniscient narrator and giving the voice to an impartial teller of her story she gives the story an ambiguous and undeterminable quality, which forces the readers to think for themselves, since there is no one there to guide them or interpret and explain the story to them.

I would say that the duality of life and death together with the duality of time are the main themes at work in this novel, with each pair representing each other's doubles. The characters know that living means dying and in order to persevere in life they have to learn how to exist in both aspects of time. Exterior time rules reality with all its clocks demanding the characters to be in the present. Interior time is the time of the human mind, where the characters can move freely between the present, the past and the future, in their interior monologues and their streams of consciousness.

Woolf had a great interest in real life and questions concerning human existence. In *Mrs Dalloway* she shows that she is a philosophical writer, who does not avoid posing epistemological questions such as: what is life? what is death? what is the meaning of life? Life and death pervade *Mrs Dalloway*. The word life is the most recurrent word in this philosophical odyssey and where life goes the shadow of the inevitable death follows. The characters consistently struggle with the question concerning their existences, as, for instance, Clarissa, who often broods over life: "But to go deeper, beneath what people said (all these judgements, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing called life? Oh it was very queer" (MD 107).

My aim with this essay is to investigate if *Mrs Dalloway* gives any answer to the epistemological questions about life which it poses. It will focus on the two main characters of the story: society hostess Clarissa Dalloway and shell-shocked and mentally unstable war veteran Septimus Warren Smith, who struggle side by side from beginning to end. Martin Hägglund is right when he claims in *Dying for Time* (2012) "Their relation is the organising principle of the novel" (68). Throughout the story they never meet; still, their fates are interwoven through a number of different coincidences and connections. Woolf juxtaposes and compares them to each other and parallels their separate lives as well as their separate realities, which are, although they live in the same city at the same time, completely different.

The essay is divided into three sections. The first part discusses the relativity of time and life, which provides the novel with an ambiguous atmosphere caused by the different angles

presented. Furthermore, it discusses how Woolf makes the double aspects of time assist her modernist narrative technique in creating the stream of consciousness, characteristic of her novel. Additionally it explains how Woolf's ideas about time correspond with Henri Bergson's theory of time in *Time and Free Will*. The second part highlights Woolf's anti-authoritarian ideology and her critique of the social machinery, which desperately tries to uphold the image of British power and superiority. In her own unique way she manages to mediate her viewpoint, being neither dogmatic nor judgemental. Instead, as this study will show, she uses the duality of time and space, and the ambiguous and somewhat unpredictable voice of the narrator to establish that there is no absolute truth about anything or anybody. Woolf also highlights, through her depiction of the characters Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, how vital the interdependence between the interior and exterior reality is to human life. The third section accents Woolf's attachment to life and death. She celebrates this duality of life by using allusions to Classical literature, to support her perspective. Some researchers have claimed that her celebration only involves life. In this final part of the analysis, I agree with researchers such as Christopher Herbert and Theresa Prudente, who state that she celebrates both life and death. However, I would like to add that to Woolf, an embrace of life and death includes death as in suicide. One of her more convincing ideas in this novel is that no one who commits suicide wants to die, but there is simply nowhere else to go.

Nothing is absolute

Clarissa Dalloway's day of party arrangements moves on in linear time. However, her stream of consciousness and her interior monologues keep disrupting the linearity of time. On Clarissa's way out buying flowers for the party she suddenly experiences a memory of Bourton through "a little squeak of the hinges" (MD 1). Woolf highlights the consciousness as a particular space, floating through an immaterial reality, continuously flooded by all sorts of sensory perceptions. Since Clarissa exists in the exteriority and the interiority at the same time, the two separate processes do not only occur constantly, but also simultaneously. In her essay 'Modern Fiction' Woolf proposes that the reader:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad

impressions-trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel [...] Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however, disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness [...]. This method has the merit of bringing us closer to what we were prepared to call life itself (MF 160).

To explain the complexity of the human mind Woolf gives readers access to the interior reality of her characters, which are run by their inner monologues and streams of consciousness, freed from all forms of chronological order, logic or structure. “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged,” Woolf wrote in her famous essay *Modern Fiction*: “life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.”⁽⁴⁾ This imagery forms a metaphoric universe, constantly changing in shape. Consequently, what Woolf suggests is that everyone has his or her own universe, individually shaped by his or her interior reality. The inner space is also a private space, a place where the characters can withdraw from the exterior reality to contemplate and heal. This interior space, symbolised by Clarissa’s small and simple, almost ascetic bedroom in the attic, Woolf describes as a lonely place: “There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room” (MD 26). When the exterior reality becomes too much for her, as when she finds out that she is not invited to Lady Bruton’s luncheon, shocked by the fact that Richard is invited but she is not, Clarissa has to withdraw to her shelter, to her interior self, like a wounded soldier. Woolf disrupts strict structure to question the chronology of time. In the middle of the external turmoil, she designs the timeless moments, internal experiences, which help the characters to persevere in the chaotic external reality.

Woolf’s narrative technique is in constant shift in the novel. The descriptions of real life, as for instance when Clarissa is buying flowers or withdrawing to her room, are interrupted by the interior monologues and streams of consciousness. Additionally, the transference between the numerous characters’ interior monologues is almost imperceptible, which gives the story a mysterious atmosphere. The non-omniscient perspective, which Woolf has chosen for her narrator, contributes to the multifaceted depiction of the characters’ fates. The narrator’s voice, with its effortless and almost undetectable shift between the characters’ minds, is blurring the boundaries between the different characters’ interior monologues. The narrator does not change

their tone nor his vocabulary entering the different characters' minds. Through this method Woolf creates an impression they all have something that unites them and that all these streams of consciousness shaping the development of the novel, eventually unite into a bigger stream imaging a universal consciousness; a stream Woolf calls life. She also uses the narrative voice to "emphasize" as Theresa Prudent says "the intermediate position of this narrative role, which in her novel proves to hold both an all-encompassing position able to penetrate the characters' interior lives, and simultaneously, a limited view which confesses the impossibility to explore human consciousness fully" (279). Woolf lets the impartial narrator enter Clarissa's mind numerous times, never judging or explaining. Instead it is up to readers to decide, if possible, who Clarissa really is.

Everyone in the novel has a mind of their own, but in order not to feel alienated it is indispensable to share a common reality with others. Clarissa is one person when she lets go of reality, and her mind is swept away wherever her stream of consciousness is taking her. It is in these moments the readers get to know the true Clarissa because in her interior reality she does not pretend. In times of self-exploration, she questions her life, as for instance why she chose Richard instead of Peter. Why she cannot stop thinking about Sally? By giving the readers insight into the interior reality of the characters, Woolf lets them know more about the character than the characters know about themselves. Conclusively, they know that Clarissa's choice to marry a man was a submission to social restrictions, which meant the loss of her sexual identity. They know about her frigidity. They realise that Clarissa would never even consider inviting Septimus, coming from the working class, to her party, but that she is obliged to invite Sir William even though she despises him. What they also know is about her battle with the monster inside of her that haunts her soul and triggers the hatred toward Miss Killman:

the soul; never to be content quite, or quite secure, for at any moment the brute would be stirring, this hatred which, especially since her illness, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine; gave her physical pain, and made all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots, as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love! this hatred! (MD 9)

Woolf also presents the other part of Clarissa, where she is Mrs Dalloway married to a Member

of Parliament and, as such:

She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (MD 8)

In this representation of Clarissa, she ceases to be the independent woman she is as her interior self. As a middle aged, married woman she is of no interest to anyone. She is just a wife, who is not even invited to the luncheon at Lady Bruton's, to which her husband Richard is invited to discuss a letter addressed to *The Times*.

Nevertheless Clarissa manages to go between her interior space and her exterior reality, in comparison with Septimus who is locked in his interior reality and cannot function in real life. By unfolding this difference between the two characters, Woolf underlines the significance of the connection between the interior space and the exterior space. Clarissa, who can combine her interior and exterior self survives. Septimus does not.

Time is as an omnipresent theme in the novel. It is not described as linear or chronological. Quite the contrary: in *Mrs Dalloway*, time is madness, a thread, which leads the characters in all sorts of directions, back and forth between the past, the present and the future. Exterior time and interior time interact to create the philosophical dimensions of the narrative, where the past is constantly haunting the present, while the actual clock time demands the characters' presence in the present.

Big Ben is unremittingly summoning the characters back to the present: "There! Out it boomed. First a warning; then the hour, irrevocable" (MD 2) As a memento mori, the big clock is reminding, possibly even warning, the characters of the inevitability of death. In contrast to the fluctuating interior time, real time unremorsefully strides on without stopping for anything or anyone. Nonetheless, Woolf finds a subtle way of rendering even real time a touch of relativity by introducing St. Margaret's church bell, which always chimes two minutes after Big Ben. This is the clock that Clarissa prefers:

Love – but here, the other clock, the clock which always struck two minutes after Big

Ben, came shuffling in with its lap full of odds and ends, which it dumped down as if Big Ben were all very well with his majesty laying down the law, so solemn, so just, but she must remember all sorts of little things besides MD 112).

To Clarissa, St. Margaret represents the women who take care of all the “little things besides”(MD 112) while the men are busy taking care of more important things, as for example politics or war.

There is an undeniable resemblance between Woolf’s perspective on time and that of the French philosopher Henri Bergson’s, even though scholars seem to agree that Woolf never read Bergson. Bergson’s theory enfolds both the duality of time and the duality of reality. As Katie Moss argues,

Bergson’s theory of duration considers all moments of time to coexist. At any given moment, the past, present, and future mingle within our consciousness, and this duration cannot be divided into individual moments along a traditional timeline

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf shows that consciousness is continuously moving back and forth through time and is also capable of dynamical changes at any moment. The consciousness is constantly shaped and reshaped. When present experience becomes the past, when it can be processed and interpreted, the interpretation can change a character’s whole personal viewpoint, as, for example, when the distressed and alienated Clarissa experiences a revelation after having heard about of Septimus’ suicide. At first she identifies with him, she physically experiences his pain they are finally united. Nonetheless her devastating sympathy with Septimus arouses her love for life and her spirit is renewed.

In *Times of the Free Will*, Henri Bergson writes, “Outside of me, in space, there is never more than a single position of the hand and the pendulum, for nothing is left of the past positions. Within myself, a process of organisation or interpenetration of conscious states is going on, which constitutes true duration” (63). From the perspective of exterior time, the past moment is just a moment lost in a constant flow, while in the interior time the moment is integrated with all the other moments that shape the stream of consciousness and cannot be measured or divided into separate moments. Time is a flux. An imprint or an impression can only be made in the present,

then it is either forgotten or turned into a memory, and as such, it belongs to the past. Woolf's use of stream of consciousness to describe how the minds of the characters are working corresponds with Bergson's idea of duration, which means that all moments of time coexist within the human mind. In thinking about the past, the character can re-experience something once experienced in the present and make it last longer. Some memories are immortal, in the way the memory of Sally's kiss is to Clarissa.

Memories give density to the present. Since memories are preserved in the past, in thinking about the past, the past becomes part of the present again. Clarissa revives the recollections of her beloved youth, when she was in the centre of everything, enjoying everyone's appreciation. These memories help her recover in the present, as when she is reminiscing about her love for Sally Seton and their kiss: "then comes the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down" (MD 35). Clarissa holds on to this moment of passion that she experienced with Sally as if she had been given the most precious present, a diamond, to save and keep forever.

Woolf offers an unstable and uncertain perspective on human existence. The world she has created for her characters is a world in flux. The trust in the invincibility and superior position of the British Empire is gone and a new world order is underway. A new era is steaming in with its new technology, innovations and industrialisation, as well as the spreading of new thoughts and ideas. The rigid restrictions enforced by the British class-system are questioned. Members of the privileged upper class, to which Clarissa belongs, cling on to the old values and the superiority of their kingdom. Life can, however, no longer be defined by some absolute dogmatic truth. Instead, Woolf claims, everyone has the right to create an individual definition of human existence based on personal preferences and experiences.

Woolf succeeds in mirroring the theory of relativity in the depiction of time, characters, reality and life itself. Her close relation to the theory of relativity stems not as much from Einstein as it does from the nineteenth century philosophical tradition of relativity, with writers, thinkers and philosophers including Walter Pater, Karl Pearson and J K Clifford. They all belonged to the same discourse of relativity claiming, in Karl Pearson's words, as cited by Christopher Herbert, that: "There is no absolute code of morality, no absolute philosophy nor absolute religion" According to Herbert their discourse is a "credo of resistance to [...] the acute

contemporary menace of authoritarian and dogmatic absolutism” (200). The world seen from a relativistic perspective must *per se* hold the insight that there is no absolute truth about anything or anyone, just a number of different perceptions. In Woolf’s novel nothing can be judged nor interpreted from one viewpoint only; everything must be understood in relation and connection to the surrounding world. Clarissa for instance is interpreted very differently in the other characters’ minds depending on what kind of relationship they have with her. The characters can only exist as long as they are interrelated to one another. Before the war Septimus was happy and energetic, a poetic autodidact in love with a beautiful girl to whom he recited Shakespeare. Now he cannot relate to anyone anymore, except for his dead comrade Evans, so therefore he must, inevitably, die.

Just after the war Septimus returns to his work where everyone is proud of his achievement. The whole society needs the soldiers to be heroes so the war can be justified. Septimus is shocked when he realises that people are proud of the horrible things he has done and [...] the world itself is without meaning” and “he descended another step into the pit” and “he dropped his head on his hands. Now he had surrendered” (MD 79). The sight of his friend’s slaughtered body haunted him: “His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock” (MD 59). Surely George Panichas is right to claim that:

Clearly Septimus’ friendship with Evans is a “sacramental” one, of the ethereal kind that developed among the combatants, now necessarily free of class distinctions, confronting a common enemy and a common danger, with a common loyalty and solidarity (237).

Woolf uses a compassionate tone in depicting Septimus as this sensitive and intellectual young man. Notable is that she acknowledges the post-traumatic stress syndrome fifty years before it became a diagnosis.

As a result of this stress condition, Septimus still cannot exist in the present and his mind is obsessed with the past. Alienated from the rest of society, he sees no meaning in life. In comparison, Clarissa, who is also obsessed with the past, but rather in the form of a romanticised escapism, has to go back to her youth to relive the happiest moments of her life. Nonetheless, her daydreaming of the past does not constitute an obstacle to her involvement in the present - in real life. She manages to divide herself into two parts: Clarissa, her interior sensitive and brooding

self, which she never exposes to anyone, and Mrs Dalloway, her exterior, social and socially established self. Clarissa is sometimes described in the novel as superficial. Yet, the reader knows all about her need for independence and her existential angst through her interior monologues. By depicting one character seen from different angles, Woolf thus stresses that the judgment of someone's character is relative; it depends on from whose viewpoint it is made.

When analysing and close-reading the frequent interior monologues and interpreting the stream of consciousness, full of impressions, dreams, suppressed feelings, anticipations, imageries, scents and sensations, readers rediscover their own streams of consciousness, recognising the unstoppable flood of thoughts circling through the mind. The reader realises that the memory and experience of the past is constantly reshaped by the perceptions in the present, which presumably is the effect which Woolf hopes to produce in for the reader.

Woolf demands full attention from the reader. To get to know and possibly even understand the characters the readers have to discover the pattern that connects them. The pattern, however, is not just one-dimensional; its threads branch out in all possible directions of human experience. When Woolf wrote *The Hours*, which was the original title of *Mrs Dalloway*, she introduced a technique which she describes in *A Writer's Diary* and calls tunnelling: "I should say a good deal about *The Hours*, & my discovery; how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment" (263). In her idiosyncratic style, Woolf skilfully digs the caves behind the characters using both compassion and humour as well as a great deal of insight. Martin Hägglund describes Woolf's writing

On one hand, Woolf has a celebrated ability to depict moments of time in their unique texture, [...] On the other hand, Woolf also depicts the relentless negativity of time that destroys the moment to which it gives rise (56).

To stand a chance of comprehending the perceptiveness of a novel like *Mrs Dalloway*, it has to be read more than once, because, in this narrative, reading is thinking. The philosophical questions about being are persistently present in the novel with a whole spectrum of perspectives and angles to reflect upon. Both Clarissa and Septimus are questioning life – if it is worth living. They appreciate the beauty in life and they want to live, but they feel alienated and left out from

society, from themselves, possibly even from life. Their solitudes are present in all sorts of circumstances, from Clarissa not being invited to Lady Bruton's luncheon to Septimus not fitting in to the society to which he once belonged.

Another good example of this duality would be Woolf's unforgettably vibrant depiction of London, which stands in an illusively bright contrast to the dark painful memories of the war. When Clarissa is buying flowers for her party, the city is dressed in its best summer costume, bright green and radiant, so busy and full of life that it seems to be bursting with excitement. Woolf's brilliant prose creates a perfect merge of the relief the characters feel that the war is over and the expectation of entering a new era. Moreover, she contrasts this joyous surface with a lurking sense of gloominess. Five years after the war, its dark cloud still hovers over the characters. They all try to hide from it, but they cannot escape. By capturing the characters' feelings of alienation and their struggle of adapting to reality and maintaining the appearance of fulfilment, Woolf thus uncovers the loss of the pre-war British identity, its imperial pride, and superiority.

Clarissa is the evident illustration of denial, in her way of beautifying the world and repressing her pain and her fear of death and decay. Her desperate attempt to make herself immune to the devastation is a denial of things lost in the war — loss of dreams for the future, loss of pride, peace and prosperity. Still, she has an anxious sorrow torturing her from inside, leaving her no peace: "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing." (MD 7). Everyone in the novel is affected by the war in some way. Still they try to keep their tears to themselves and show that they still believe in the future of the British Empire, as, "Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite son, killed" (MD 2). Lady Bexborough serves as an emblem of the pure conservative British aristocracy, where composure and stoicism are constructive and favourable characteristics especially if one belongs, as Lady Bexborough, to the aristocracy.

Representing the clear opposite of composure the anxious and emotionally susceptible Septimus, who incapable of hiding his open wounds, is the personification of the devastating post-war collapse. Septimus loves life. Nonetheless, he cannot stand being alive. The memories of the war haunt him, and he is no longer capable of keeping apart what is real and what is not.

However, Woolf has not written a novel just about the duality of time; it is rather a

profound depiction of the human struggle to come to terms with life: experiences of loss and trauma, abuse of power, loss of faith, despair and insanity.

A Life Worth Living

Mrs Dalloway captures the temporality of life, to which Woolf connects the fear of death. Both time and life can be seen as assets, and then again, from another angle as liabilities. Woolf experiments with narrative techniques to find ways to get closer to reality, closer to life. She depicts the unpredictability that life comprises. She presents life as being, at the same time, a promise and a threat, meaning that life offers possibilities of both gain and loss. The characters know their lifetimes are limited to a certain amount of days and everyone is afraid of dying. Paradoxically, sometimes the fear of dying evokes the fear of living. Fear of dying stops “the investment in life”, as Martin Hägglund so pointedly expresses it Woolf effectively contrasts the fear of death with the love of life. Clarissa collects moments of epiphany, transfixing them in order to save them as memories for later. Woolf calls these moments “moments of being” in her essay “A Sketch of the Past” from the collection of posthumously-published autobiographical essays *Moments of Being* (1976). These moments play a central role in the novel. However, I would argue that not even these moments escape relativism, and that in Woolf’s own interpretation, these moments of ecstatic presence encompass not only the divine beauty of life but also its hellish darkness:

She felt very young; at the same time unspeakable old. She sliced like a knife through everything: at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out. Far out to sea and alone; she always had that feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. (MD 6).

Clarissa is biological clock is ticking it scares her. Her body is not old yet, but her soul is. She is standing outside looking at her own life. She is tired of living, of being left out and alone. The feeling of alienation is something she shares with Septimus, who feels completely misunderstood and left out by society. Another thing they have in common is that they both retire into the solitude of their inner space where they can experience the past and contemplate death. Only, Septimus stays in the solitude of his inner space, while Clarissa knows that she has to participate

in reality if she wants to survive. Here Woolf emphasises, in accordance with Bergson, that the interior reality has to merge with the exterior reality in order to form a complete self. Septimus lacks the ability to reconcile his memories with his current reality and so, consequently, he has to die.

Clarissa uses the interior time as a possibility to escape reality while Septimus experiences his interior as something separating him from reality. The lively almost chaotic city seems to stimulate Clarissa, while it has the opposite effect on Septimus, who feels almost paralysed by the turbulence. He experiences fear, which stems from his traumatic experiences in the war. Unable to separate the past from the present, he cannot exist in the present, and without a present, there cannot be a future. He feels forlorn in a world, which everybody else interprets differently. Since he cannot see his past as memories, his past is his present. He speaks to his dead comrade: "Evans!" he cried. There was no answer. A mouse had squeaked, or a curtain rustled. Those were the voices of the dead."(MD 128). His mental state is getting worse and the doctors agree that he belongs in a mental institution.

Septimus is, as Peter Childs puts it, "obsessed with the past"(104). He is considered to be insane and the authorities, here represented by the two doctors, Holmes and Bradshaw, want to put him away. Life has no longer any meaning for him, and the only way to amend the loss of meaning is to tell the truth about the war. There is, however, no one who wants to listen to him: "So he was deserted. The whole world was clamouring, "Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes" (MD 75.) Septimus becomes the scapegoat, which is going to be sacrificed for the sake of others, so they can be saved. Woolf describes him as a martyr, and by turning him into a martyr she makes him a hero.

An interesting fact is that throughout the story, Clarissa and Septimus never meet. Following up on the motif of dichotomy running through the novel, Woolf has chosen to depict them as if they were two sides of the same coin and neither of the characters can exist without the other. Moreover, placing them in two parallel stories, constantly comparing and contrasting them to one another, Woolf underlines the complexity of their interplay and how crucial their different perspectives are to the development of the story. Septimus comes from the working class, having worked his way up the social ladder by serving well in the war: "He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won the promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive" (MD 76). Nevertheless, upon returning from the war, shell-shocked and

mentally incapacitated, his life has come to a halt. He suffers from his brutal and apocalyptic memories where his best comrade Evans was bombed to pieces right in front of his eyes. His life is disintegrating and even if “he was bound to survive”(MD 76) he will not. Clarissa, on the other hand, is upper class, living a rather boring but comfortable and sheltered life. She is the habit expressing her ardent love for life and uses it almost like an incantation against time and death. She fears “time itself [...] the dwindling of life; how years by years her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable of any longer stretching” (MD 30). Her exhilarating love for life does not chase off her constant existential angst and her feeling of loss, loss of love.

In the midst of this external turmoil, Clarissa turns inwards, back to her past, seeking solace in the memory of an exquisite moment:

Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over — the moment. (MD 32)

The moments of being are the magic moments of life, which Clarissa saves in her memory, so she can survive all the moments of nonbeing. However, as mentioned earlier, there are two aspects at work even here: as in the circle of yin and yang, where yin represents the light and yang represents the dark, the ‘moment of being’ also has two separate aspects. Teresa Prudent explores this duality: “to transfix often employed by Woolf in conveying the moments of being, unveils the double significance here showing how the crystallisation of time holds the potential to lead not only to the feeling of ecstatic revelations but also to the dramatic sense of petrification” (269). Prudent is referring to when Septimus reacts to experiences in the present with the same intensity as in the war field. The cataclysm of the war is his moment of being, his hellish epiphany.

Clarissa survives, saved by her moments of being, which stand in bright contrast the apocalyptic moments of being experienced by Septimus. Clarissa transfixes and saves them as

powerful magic memories. Constantly aware of the time passing, that every moment is unique and has a quality of its own. She wants to transfix every “drop” of this passing time before it dissolves. Martin Hägglund writes in *Dying for Time*, “The pathos of Woolf’s moments of living stems from the fact that they are always already moments of dying. (76). *Mrs Dalloway* is indeed a story of survival. In Woolf’s writing, time is a powerful force, which interacts with the theme of life and death. Consequently, the novel is not just a story about a life, as, in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, it is also about Life and its “moments of being,” to which Woolf juxtaposes Death. The presence of the dichotomy of Life and Death is stamped right through the entire novel. The feared journey between life and death creates the temporality of life. The temporality and the indeterminability of life stop the characters from participating and enjoying it. In illustrating Clarissa’s and Septimus’ marring existential angsts, Woolf places an emphasis on the temporality as a necessary condition for being. If human beings were immortal this temporal perspective on life would be lost. Hence, Woolf states we need doubt so that we can think, we need despair to be able to feel happiness and most importantly, we need death to be able to live.

Woolf strives to train the readers to dispute the authoritative power and its appointed judges, who, as Septimus says in referring Dr Holmes and Dr Bradshaw, “saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted” (MD 131). As an incarnation of evil stands Woolf’s memorable portrait of Sir William Bradshaw, as a dictator of the absolute truth, who uses his two Goddesses named Proportion and Conversion to oppress the patients, Woolf lets the impartial narrator step out of his role and gives him the words of strong judgement, as if it came from somewhere else, outside the narrative itself. Sir William represents undoubtedly the dark power in the tale and in *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf has made him the executor of the powerful authority that owns the truth and the right to enforce it upon its citizens, as for instance the truths about the war being over and about British supremacy. Clarissa thinks of him as “a great doctor yet to me obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage-forcing your soul, that was it” (MD 163). He converts people, make them adapt to the established social norm. Sir William “made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportions” (MD 87).

Sir William’s authoritative power does not have any empathy with those who did not share his views; people like Septimus, who do not fit into the system of society. Hence, people

who create a stir by, for example, criticising the war, are better put away somewhere. Consequently, Sir William, like the Count Dracula to whom Herbert compares him, sucking the blood from his victims, draws the last spark of hope out of Septimus leaving him with no other option than death. From Sir William's perspective, "the ends justify the means", and as long as the power relation remains the same, everything is in order, which is seconded by the mighty sound of Big Ben, the very emblem of British power and control.

Affirming Life and Death

At the beginning of the story, Clarissa plunges into the beauty of life, partly because she needs this explosion of feelings to keep her fear of death away. This action is mirrored by Septimus' plunge to his death, getting away from the memories of how beautiful life can be. He realises that he cannot survive in a society in denial of the war trauma. In using the mirroring effect and the function of Septimus as Clarissa's double, Woolf actually presents them as one, as two interdependent parts where neither part can exist without the other. Woolf lets Clarissa represent Life and Septimus Death and being, like Yin and Yang, each other's opposites, they fit perfectly together. However, the fact that Woolf splits the duality of life between her two characters, each having what the other lacks, is predicting Septimus' death. The fact that one has to die for the other to live suggests that Clarissa and Septimus represent two perspectives of one individual, two parts belonging to a dual consciousness

Clarissa lives with a constant anticipation that something bad is about to happen. The underlying fear is a core running all through the novel, symbolised by the recurrent lines from Shakespeare's drama *Cymbeline* - "Fear no more the heat o' the sun, Nor the furious winter's rages;" (act IV scene 2 line 1-2)- which are introduced early in the novel, as Clarissa reads them from a book spread open in a bookstore window (MD 7).. Woolf uses allusions to older literary works, literature privileged to the educated male society, and she takes the liberty of colouring them with female life asserting interpretations (de Gay 89). Woolf often used references from older literature in her work using them as intertext in the way as her allusions to Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* work in *Mrs Dalloway* Through interlinking these older texts into her own text, she used the insights she had achieved from reading to pass on and to give emphasis to the thematic concerns of her novels

The drama in itself represents death, war and nationalism, but it also signifies revival and

peace, which stands, as de Gay puts it, “In direct contrast to those who have used Shakespeare’s words as a battle call” (de Gay 92). By using *Cymbeline*, Woolf opposes the male-controlled use of Shakespeare as a justification for war. She also points at the relativity at work in interpreting and using Classical literature for a purpose. The lines from *Cymbeline* recited by both Clarissa and Septimus numerous times throughout the novel – “Fear no more the heat of the sun” – hold an important key to the story, in that they celebrate and death as a liberator. Additionally, Woolf gives these lines an extra dimension by letting both Septimus and Clarissa use them as a celebration to life. Just before going from life to death uses the lines as a last affirmation of the life he loved and in accordance with Septimus, Clarissa uses them to celebrate life, except she is using them going from death back to life.

The hypersensitive Septimus is doomed and rather kills himself than be hidden away somewhere together with his nightmares. He is well aware of the fact that the authorities never would confess to the consequences the atrocities of the war had for the mental health of the soldiers. To Woolf Septimus is the quintessence of the victim of the war. It is he, alive but not living, who has to carry the weight of suffering on his shoulders. His plunge out of the window hitting the fence, the spears penetrating his body as bayonets in the war, is a violent sacrifice. He sacrifices his life to make a statement — a revolt against the regime, which lured him to be proud of going to war and took his life away from him. In this sense, Woolf holds that suicide is a heroic act.

Woolf’s socio-political critique of the war and its aftermath tints the entire novel with a sense of sadness and loss. George Panichas writes in his “Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*: A Well of Tears”,

Clearly, whatever peacetime happenings and ambitions and hopes constitute the novel’s soul, as it were, the resonances of war cannot be entirely erased, or forgotten even years later, for somehow the war revisits human consciousness and relationships in the visible forms of remembrance of things past”

Virginia Woolf’s voice is ironic but yet full of a stark critique of the patriarchal society, which has fostered its sons to become soldiers. Soldiers, who will be sent out to war still believing that they are about to become fulfilled, when in fact they are about to die. The war makes the

characters victims of their time. Struggling in a world of lost illusions, they try to suppress their inner feelings in order to survive in the harsh post-war reality. Clarissa repeatedly gets a premonition that something bad is going to happen, like a hidden prophesy waiting for the chance to become true.

The fact that Woolf wrote *Mrs Dalloway* at the same time as Hitler collected all his vindictive arguments for Germany to start a new war, in writing *Mein Kampf*, makes way for the conclusion that the fear of an oncoming war had a considerable impact on Woolf's writing. The trauma of the war, which still haunts Woolf's characters in *Mrs Dalloway*, is emblematic for the fear that, in Herbert's words, "the demon of military violence may not have been exorcised for good as everyone longs to believe, but may only be awaiting the chance to break out temporary phase of latency into terrible action once again" (MD 204). All the characters in *Mrs Dalloway* are marked by the war, whether it is physical or psychological the traumas are constant reminders of the carnage of the war.

The irony is that Septimus, who is described as the most sensitive and intellectual of the male characters before he went, came back from the front believing that his lack of emotion gave him power and strength and "congratulated himself upon feeling so little and responsibly" (MD 62). The notion of irony becomes even stronger when the reader realises that if he had been able to keep on suppressing his feelings of loss and suffering and kept holding on to his sense of superiority, fitting so well into Bradshaw's British society, he had probably survived. However, Septimus cannot suppress his feelings, since nobody helps him, eventually, he commits suicide. Paradoxically, it becomes evident when Septimus is sitting on the windowsill prepared to jump to his death that he does not want to die. "But he will wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun was hot" (MD 132). Here the strophe from *Cymbeline* echoes in the background "Fear no more the heat of the sun" as a last celebration to life. He knows by now that he is not insane, but he cannot stand the thought of being put away in an asylum and when he hears the voice of Doctor Holmes in the stairs he cries "I'll give it to you!" (MD 135). Septimus refuses to surrender his soul to the authorities so he gives them his body. Woolf's portrayal of Holmes and Bradshaw as the gatekeepers, who keep society clean from obstructive ideas, and Septimus as the hero, who leaps out the window to avoid his persuaders and through death preserves his soul, shows her strong conviction that death and even suicide can be seen from different perspectives.

The news of the suicide serves as an anti-climax. Clarissa is finally, after all the preparations, hosting her successful party. As a messenger of death, the latest guest of all, Sir Bradshaw arrives bringing the horrific news of Septimus' death: "Oh! Thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought" (MD 162). Here is where the two juxtaposed systems in the novel clash. The beauty and the refinement of the setting, the splendour of the party with all guests coming together, is suddenly invaded by a violent suicide echoing the horrors from the war and "The party's splendour fell to the floor" (MD 163). Death comes as an intruder in the middle of life and this scene mirrors Woolf's anti-military approach; how she sees war as a grim and ruthless invader interrupting and destroying people's lives.

Although Clarissa does not know Septimus, she is taken by his fate and Woolf uses Shakespeare to link the two of them together (de Gay 91). Shortly before killing himself, presumably in letting go of his fear Septimus imagines hearing Nature whisper the words from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* "Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more" (MD 182). When hearing about Septimus suicide, The suicide has awakened Clarissa's own fear of death, and later she repeats the same words from *Cymbeline* that Septimus thought he heard before he died and her fear fades away, and she can return to her party. It is a revelation to Clarissa when she understands that reality can be recomposed and reinterpreted, into a construction that makes life bearable.

The story ends with Clarissa returning to her party. Even though she contemplates death while she re-experiences Septimus death she chooses life and "must assemble" (MD 165) getting ready for the exterior reality, welcoming the unpredictable present. By stepping out of the little room (her interior reality) where she just contemplated death, into the drawing room where her friends are expecting her (her exterior reality) she literally steps from death to life. Her friend and former suitor Peter Walsh is, as always, waiting for her and "there she was"(MD 172). The party goes on, life goes on and the clock keeps ticking.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf 's evocative entrancing novel *Mrs Dalloway* cannot be read and fathomed unless the reader is prepared to invest emotionally in the reading. The story is a challenging journey that meanders its way between the different characters in space and time going in and out of their

minds: following their actions, thoughts, and feelings of fear of death and the love of life. Woolf orchestrates a symphony of voices performing both in unison and in individual modes, resulting in a harmonious consonance. This chorus of individual voices underpins her perception of the perspective of the individual as vital. Nevertheless, the chorus the characters are singing is a song about life and it cannot be sung as solo because it takes many different types of voices to make it sound right. Accordingly, all the individual streams of consciousness running in the same direction and uniting in the broader more forceful stream, which in Woolf's representation is life. The obnoxious Miss Kilman in her mackintosh is life, the impeccably dressed but sleazy Hugh Withbrand is life, even the socially prominent but devilish Sir William is life, war is also life as well as a beautiful day in London.

Mrs Dalloway is indeed a story about life. However, Woolf does not present life as a concept, something that can be formulated or subsumed, and she does not have any intention of giving answers to the existential questions about life. Instead she makes us as readers think and rethink, about time and temporality, inner monologues, identity, sexuality, power, war, oppression, sane and insane and the fact that all we really know about life is that it encloses death.

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