

Virginia Woolf's use of time in Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract

Mrs. Dalloway is the first of Virginia Woolf's successful, mature, experimental novels. It uses impressionistic techniques and interior monologues to reveal her characters' personalities, Mrs. Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Smith. In Mrs. Dalloway the events take place within a single day. This uncommon strategy displays the novel's complication of time in general. For example, while human beings tend to assume of time in terms of the steady ticking of the clock - seconds, minutes, hours, and days - Mrs. Dalloway tells how people can relive, through memory, whole years inside the space of minutes.

Keywords: Mrs. Dalloway, novel's, Virginia Woolf.

INTRODUCTION

Time plays a vital role in the Stream-of-Consciousness novels. The Stream-of-Consciousness novelists never think that the morning and the evening are one day; evening or morning or any part of either might represent eternity or less than a single pulse-beat. They deviate from the convention of chronological continuity. They broke up time into atomic bits and scattered them as they liked, whereas the Victorian novelists 'clung on to the calendar and clock.' The exponents of this new technique believe that all reality lies in consciousness and that our consciousness does not proceed logically and coherently.

In traditional novels, the actions span over years or generations. The Stream of Consciousness novelists are not constrained chronologically from the cradle to the grave. He flashes back; he looks before, he shifts backwards and forwards. The destruction of the tyranny of time necessitated the minimization

of plot, almost complete elimination of action, and the detailed description of characters by describing their appearances, gestures, circumstances and physical habits. Before Virginia Woolf, the novelists did not care much for manipulating Time in the novels. They limited themselves to the sequence of events. For example, the novels of Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope can be seen as mere serials. The reader will like to know what will come next in the arrangement of the sequence, and the novelist had under meticulous compulsion to stick to a stiff scheme of continued in our next instalment. There was no scope for experiment and development in such a framework. Therefore, Virginia Woolf contemplated Scott as a storyteller and nothing more.

Mrs. Woolf considers the story as the lowest form of the literary organism; the novelist's preoccupation with love is importantly a reflection of his state of mind. At the same time, he creates every page has a hint or a suggestion that makes us stop to think or to

dispute. Therefore, she advised the novelist to come into the light of things and cut unanchored from the eternal tea-table and the credible and successful formulas that represent the whole of our human adventure. The human psyche, one's concept of self (being), and time are all intertwined in Woolf's mind. For Woolf, the past and present coexist in the human mind, and the self is more of a series of continuing processes than a definite point. We are the sum of our experiences, ideas, decisions, hopes, fears, and imaginations at any given time.

Bernard Blackstone considers Mrs. Dalloway an experiment with time. Time is generally understood in three aspects- 'mechanical' or 'clock time; psychological or inner time, or what Bergson calls 'duree' or inner duration; and historic time, or time in relation to nationwide or worldwide events. Whereas the clock-time and the psychological time have been skillfully manipulated in Mrs. Dalloway; there are casual references to the historical time, i.e., events like the war, etc. The clock-time concerns with passing moments or hours, measured by the mechanical clock. The psychological or inner time is the voyage from youth to age; from the present to the past and the future. The 'historic time covers nationwide and worldwide events of the past and the present. The clock-time and the psychological time have been skillfully handled by Mrs. Woolf in her novel Mrs. Dalloway; there are very casual references to the historical time.

As an example of clock-time, the novel's action takes place in a single day, and all the transitions of characters and events are indicated by the chiming of Big Ben and other clocks of London. It is early morning when Clarissa steps out of her house in Westminster; eleven o'clock when Peter bursts in; half-past eleven when Peter in Trafalgar Square receives a strange hallucination; a quarter to twelve when Septimus smiles at the man in the grey suit who is dead; precisely twelve o'clock when Septimus and Rezia enter Sir William Bradshaw's house and Clarissa Dalloway lays her green dress on the bed; half-past one when Hugh Whitbread and Richard Dalloway meet for luncheon at Lady Bruton's in Brook Street; three o'clock when Richard comes home with

his flowers; half-past three when Mrs. Dalloway sees the old lady move away from the window; six when Septimus kills himself and Peter thinks with admiration of civilization. So the clock-time is a relentless stream knotting together the incongruous, separating friends, and making nonsense of emotions. In a single day, one may live a lifetime. The reference to the clock-time, now and then, is meaningful. It denotes a break in the continuity of time from the past to the present and serves an artistic purpose, enabling the author to portray the shift of thoughts. For instance, we can quote two of several passages like this from the novel.

Clock time is neutral, impersonal, and implacable; it affects all who have physical existence. Using a device later adopted by motion films, Mrs. Woolf occasionally will stop the novel from fixing her character in a moment of this clock time as they pursue disparate aims simultaneously. At the beginning of this century, modern psychologists showed that consciousness did not move in a straight line. Mrs. Woolf was further influenced by Bergson's concept of fluidity and transcendentalism, as well as his ideas of time. Outer time intrudes with the striking of Big Ben, whose leaden circles, punctuating the reverie of Mrs. Dalloway, mark the disparity between actual and mechanical time. Parts one and three of *To the Lighthouse* are duration or time lived through, but the middle section, called 'Time Passes', is external time in which the decay of the empty house takes the place of the clock. In *The Waves*, the interlude of wave, sun, snail, and vegetable represents external time, while the rest of the book records the more elastic progress of duration. Mrs. Woolf plays with Bergson's times. Born in the age of Elizabeth, Orlando is thirty-six years old in October 1928. Three hundred years and thirty-six represent inner time and outer time or vice versa. And time is complicated by memory, through which several times, says, Mrs. Woolf, may proceed together.

The expansion or contraction of inner time with the intensity of experience is discussed in the essays on clock time and inner time that she

inserted to perplex the unphilosophical reader. The transitions from the past to the present or from one consciousness to another become easy, smooth and natural, and the narration gains clarity. Part of the effectiveness of the manipulation of time as it affects the lives of Mrs. Woolf's characters comes from her frequent confrontation of 'real' clock time with the 'unreal' or psychological sense of past and future, infinitely stretchable, now so far away in infancy, now so close in the present, when the mood demands. The confrontation of mechanical time or clock time and psychological time is one of the novelist's significant devices to discipline and order the formless and chaotic stream-of-consciousness novel.

The time in Mrs. Dalloway moves forward and backwards. The process is an alternating one. In the words of R.L. Chambers that a point is fixed, first a point of consciousness, Clarissa Dalloway, from that point the movement swings, back through time, away in space, opening vistas and displaying experience and character, then forward again to the present moment; second, a point in time and space, Bond Street on this morning in June; from that point the movement swings again this time through different points of consciousness, Edgar J. Watkins, Septimus and Lucrezia, Sarah Bletchley, Mr. Bowley, and so on; then thirdly, another point of consciousness, this time Septimus and Lucrezia, from which the movement can swing back in time again; then the point in present time once more, with the aeroplane sky-writing over London; and so the movement swings back to the point of consciousness, Clarissa Dalloway. On this pattern, the whole structure of the book is carefully built up.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf shows the consciousness of Mrs. Dalloway and the characters such as Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith. Peter Walsh, a former lover of Mrs. Dalloway, has come back from India and is likely to attend her garden party. Mrs. Dalloway asks him not to forget her party. From this point of view, Peter Walsh's thought shifts backwards in time. He recollects his experiences in India, the diseases there, the

love for Clarissa, and her change. He sees things in retrospect. His mind moves backwards to the conditions in India; then it moves towards the present from the past when he thinks of the speed of the motor car seen by him. The chiming of the bell reminds Peter Walsh of his past intimate attachment with Clarissa. The memory is visual. The chronological sequence of time has not been adopted. Time symbolizes eternal time. A day represents the whole life of a person. All the transitions of events and characters take place when the clock chimes. A clock chiming indicates almost every fifteen minutes.

By compounding past and present, Virginia Woolf can concentrate the entire career of a character into a moment in which the reader catches him. His whole past is behind him, and the whole future is before. Sweet and sour memories of the past and the tickling aspirations of the future keep on crossing his mind, and anything at any moment might establish an association with something in the past. This is something in the past which, to the character, is more significant than the present moment, which a mere instrument connects the reader's thought-stream with the vital moment in the past. The barriers between the past and present are no longer there. The character's mind operating at any particular moment has to work under the impact of his total experience.

In Mrs. Dalloway, chronological time is solely one sense of time. On a related theme, the book multiplies time by presenting diverse characters' ideas, each of whom take note and experience time, the previous and the present, in different ways. The characters deliver the past into the present, enable the meaning and remembrance of the current to be shaped using the past, and shape reminiscences of and feelings about the previous with experience in the present.

Reference

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