**MRS DALLOWAY ANALYSIS**

**Context:**

Virginia Woolf, the English novelist, critic, and essayist, was born on January 25, 1882, to Leslie Stephen, a literary critic, and Julia Duckworth Stephen. Woolf grew up in an upper-middle-class, socially active, literary family in Victorian London. She had three full siblings, two half-brothers, and two half-sisters. She was educated at home, becoming a voracious reader of the books in her father’s extensive library. Tragedy first afflicted the family when Woolf’s mother died in 1895, then hit again two years later, when her half-sister, Stella, the caregiver in the Stephen family, died. Woolf experienced her first bout of mental illness after her mother’s death, and she suffered from mania and severe depression for the rest of her life.

Patriarchal, repressive Victorian society did not encourage women to attend universities or to participate in intellectual debate. Nonetheless, Woolf began publishing her first essays and reviews after 1904, the year her father died and she and her siblings moved to the Bloomsbury area of London. Young students and artists, drawn to the vitality and intellectual curiosity of the Stephen clan, congregated on Thursday evenings to share their views about the world. The Bloomsbury group, as Woolf and her friends came to be called, disregarded the constricting taboos of the Victorian era, and such topics as religion, sex, and art fueled the talk at their weekly salons. They even discussed homosexuality, a subject that shocked many of the group’s contemporaries. For Woolf, the group served as the undergraduate education that society had denied her.

*The Voyage Out*, Woolf’s first novel, was published in 1915, three years after her marriage to Leonard Woolf, a member of the Bloomsbury group. Their partnership furthered the group’s intellectual ideals. With Leonard, Woolf founded Hogarth Press, which published Sigmund Freud, Katherine Mansfield, T. S. Eliot, and other notable authors. She determinedly pursued her own writing as well: During the next few years, Woolf kept a diary and wrote several novels, a collection of short stories, and numerous essays. She struggled, as she wrote, to both deal with her bouts of bipolarity and to find her true voice as a writer. Before World War I, Woolf viewed the realistic Victorian novel, with its neat and linear plots, as an inadequate form of expression. Her opinion intensified after the war, and in the 1920s she began searching for the form that would reflect the violent contrasts and disjointed impressions of the world around her.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925, Woolf discovered a new literary form capable of expressing the new realities of postwar England. The novel depicts the subjective experiences and memories of its central characters over a single day in post–World War I London. Divided into parts, rather than chapters, the novel's structure highlights the finely interwoven texture of the characters' thoughts. Critics tend to agree that Woolf found her writer’s voice with this novel. At forty-three, she knew her experimental style was unlikely to be a popular success but no longer felt compelled to seek critical praise. The novel did, however, gain a measure of commercial and critical success. This book, which focuses on commonplace tasks, such as shopping, throwing a party, and eating dinner, showed that no act was too small or too ordinary for a writer’s attention. Ultimately, *Mrs. Dalloway* transformed the novel as an art form.

Woolf develops the book’s protagonist, [Clarissa Dalloway](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/clarissa-dalloway/), and myriad other characters by chronicling their interior thoughts with little pause or explanation, a style referred to as stream of consciousness. Several central characters and more than one hundred minor characters appear in the text, and their thoughts spin out like spider webs. Sometimes the threads of thought cross—and people succeed in communicating. More often, however, the threads do not cross, leaving the characters isolated and alone. Woolf believed that behind the “cotton wool” of life, as she terms it in her autobiographical collection of essays *Moments of Being* (1941), and under the downpour of impressions saturating a mind during each moment, a pattern exists.

Characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* occasionally perceive life’s pattern through a sudden shock, or what Woolf called a “moment of being.” Suddenly the cotton wool parts, and a person sees reality, and his or her place in it, clearly. “In the vast catastrophe of the European war,” wrote Woolf, “our emotions had to be broken up for us, and and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction.” These words appear in her essay collection, *The Common Reader*, which was published just one month before *Mrs. Dalloway*. Her novel attempts to uncover fragmented emotions, such as desperation or love, in order to find, through “moments of being,” a way to endure. While writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf reread the Greek classics along with two new modernist writers, Marcel Proust and James Joyce. Woolf shared these writers' interest in time and psychology, and she incorporated these issues into her novel. She wanted to show characters in flux, rather than static, characters who think and emote as they move through space, who react to their surroundings in ways that mirrored actual human experience. Rapid political and social change marked the period between the two world wars: the British Empire, for which so many people had sacrificed their lives to protect and preserve, was in decline. Countries like India were beginning to question Britain’s colonial rule.

At home, the Labour Party, with its plans for economic reform, was beginning to challenge the Conservative Party, with its emphasis on imperial business interests. Women, who had flooded the workforce to replace the men who had gone to war, were demanding equal rights. Men, who had seen unspeakable atrocities in the first modern war, were questioning the usefulness of class-based sociopolitical institutions. Woolf lent her support to the feminist movement in her nonfiction book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), as well as in numerous essays, and she was briefly involved in the women’s suffrage movement. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* portrays the shifting political atmosphere through the characters [Peter Walsh](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/peter-walsh/), [Richard Dalloway](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/richard-dalloway/), and Hugh Whitbread, it focuses more deeply on the charged social mood through the characters [Septimus Warren Smith](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/septimus-warren-smith/) and Clarissa Dalloway. Woolf delves into the consciousness of Clarissa, a woman who exists largely in the domestic sphere, to ensure that readers take her character seriously, rather than simply dismiss her as a vain and uneducated upper-class wife. In spite of her heroic and imperfect effort in life, Clarissa, like every human being and even the old social order itself, must face death.

Woolf’s struggles with mental illness gave her an opportunity to witness firsthand how insensitive medical professionals could be, and she critiques their tactlessness in *Mrs. Dalloway*. One of Woolf’s doctors suggested that plenty of rest and rich food would lead to a full recovery, a cure prescribed in the novel, and another removed several of her teeth. In the early twentieth century, mental health problems were too often considered imaginary, an embarrassment, or the product of moral weakness. During one bout of illness, Woolf heard birds sing like Greek choruses and King Edward use foul language among some azaleas. In 1941, as England entered a second world war, and at the onset of another breakdown she feared would be permanent, Woolf placed a large stone in her pocket to weigh herself down and drowned herself in the River Ouse.

**Plot Overview:**

*Mrs. Dalloway* covers one day from morning to night in one woman’s life. [Clarissa Dalloway](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/clarissa-dalloway/), an upper-class housewife, walks through her London neighborhood to prepare for the party she will host that evening. When she returns from flower shopping, an old suitor and friend, [Peter Walsh](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/peter-walsh/), drops by her house unexpectedly. The two have always judged each other harshly, and their meeting in the present intertwines with their thoughts of the past. Years earlier, Clarissa refused Peter’s marriage proposal, and Peter has never quite gotten over it. Peter asks Clarissa if she is happy with her husband, [Richard](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/richard-dalloway/), but before she can answer, her daughter, Elizabeth, enters the room. Peter leaves and goes to Regent’s Park. He thinks about Clarissa’s refusal, which still obsesses him.

The point of view then shifts to Septimus, a veteran of World War I who was injured in trench warfare and now suffers from shell shock. Septimus and his Italian wife, Lucrezia, pass time in Regent’s Park. They are waiting for Septimus’s appointment with Sir William Bradshaw, a celebrated psychiatrist. Before the war, Septimus was a budding young poet and lover of Shakespeare; when the war broke out, he enlisted immediately for romantic patriotic reasons. He became numb to the horrors of war and its aftermath: when his friend Evans died, he felt little sadness. Now Septimus sees nothing of worth in the England he fought for, and he has lost the desire to preserve either his society or himself. Suicidal, he believes his lack of feeling is a crime. Clearly Septimus’s experiences in the war have permanently scarred him, and he has serious mental problems.

However, Sir William does not listen to what Septimus says and diagnoses “a lack of proportion.” Sir William plans to separate Septimus from Lucrezia and send him to a mental institution in the country. [Richard Dalloway](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/richard-dalloway/) eats lunch with Hugh Whitbread and Lady Bruton, members of high society. The men help Lady Bruton write a letter to the *Times*, London's largest newspaper. After lunch, Richard returns home to Clarissa with a large bunch of roses. He intends to tell her that he loves her but finds that he cannot, because it has been so long since he last said it. Clarissa considers the void that exists between people, even between husband and wife. Even though she values the privacy she is able to maintain in her marriage, considering it vital to the success of the relationship, at the same time she finds slightly disturbing the fact that Richard doesn’t know everything about her. Clarissa sees off Elizabeth and her history teacher, Miss Kilman, who are going shopping. The two older women despise one another passionately, each believing the other to be an oppressive force over Elizabeth.

Meanwhile, Septimus and Lucrezia are in their apartment, enjoying a moment of happiness together before the men come to take Septimus to the asylum. One of Septimus’s doctors, Dr. Holmes, arrives, and Septimus fears the doctor will destroy his soul. In order to avoid this fate, he jumps from a window to his death. Peter hears the ambulance go by to pick up Septimus’s body and marvels ironically at the level of London’s civilization. He goes to Clarissa’s party, where most of the novel’s major characters are assembled. Clarissa works hard to make her party a success but feels dissatisfied by her own role and acutely conscious of Peter’s critical eye. All the partygoers, but especially Peter and [Sally Seton](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/sally-seton/), have, to some degree, failed to accomplish the dreams of their youth. Though the social order is undoubtedly changing, Elizabeth and the members of her generation will probably repeat the errors of Clarissa’s generation. Sir William Bradshaw arrives late, and his wife explains that one of his patients, the young veteran (Septimus), has committed suicide.

Clarissa retreats to the privacy of a small room to consider Septimus’s death. She understands that he was overwhelmed by life and that men like Sir William make life intolerable. She identifies with Septimus, admiring him for having taken the plunge and for not compromising his soul. She feels, with her comfortable position as a society hostess, responsible for his death. The party nears its close as guests begin to leave. Clarissa enters the room, and her presence fills Peter with a great excitement.

**Setting:**

Setting is one of the most innovative aspects of *Mrs Dalloway*. The events of the story take place on a Wednesday in June 1923 (most importantly, in post-World War I London), all in one day. This choice to talk about just one day is very modernist (check out our "In a Nutshell" for more on this) and very novel – pun intended. But because the characters are so haunted by the past, the reader is taken away from London several times, and travels back in time to [Bourton](http://www.bourtoninfo.com/), to the country home owned by Clarissa’s family.

Perhaps the most important setting in the novel is its historical setting. Taking place just after World War I, we see that the effects of the war are still around, whether or not men like Richard Dalloway acknowledge the scars left behind. Septimus went off to war believing it would make him a hero; instead, he ends up a shadow of a man, traumatized to the point of committing suicide. Even Clarissa, who lives a rather privileged life, has always abided by the strict patriarchal social standards of British culture and thus misses out on the freedom she craves. Throughout *Mrs Dalloway,* we see a self-destructive faith in the greatness of nation and tradition at the expense of the individual.

Virginia Woolf does not use London in any passive way; instead, the backdrop serves the important purpose of creating context. Woolf mentions many important sites throughout the course of the story: Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, and Westminster Abbey all define the British way of life.

It's not just a matter of reminding the reader where these characters are located. Each of the landmarks represent a particular aspect of the novel. For example, the statues of famous generals and leaders in [Trafalgar Square](http://www.london.gov.uk/trafalgarsquare/) suggest the importance of patriotism to the British way of life, and Big Ben’s hourly chiming serves as a constant reminder of life’s passage.

**Themes:**

* Society and class
* Time
* Isolation
* Warfare
* Suffering
* Repression
* Memory and past
* Madness

**Protagonist:**

**Clarissa Dalloway** -  The eponymous protagonist. The novel begins with Clarissa’s point of view and follows her perspective more closely than that of any other character. As Clarissa prepares for the party she will give that evening, we are privy to her meandering thoughts. Clarissa is vivacious and cares a great deal about what people think of her, but she is also self-reflective. She often questions life’s true meaning, wondering whether happiness is truly possible. She feels both a great joy and a great dread about her life, both of which manifest in her struggles to strike a balance between her desire for privacy and her need to communicate with others. Throughout the day Clarissa reflects on the crucial summer when she chose to marry her husband, Richard, instead of her friend Peter Walsh. Though she is happy with Richard, she is not entirely certain she made the wrong choice about Peter, and she also thinks frequently about her friend Sally Seton, whom she also once loved.

Clarissa Dalloway, the heroine of the novel, struggles constantly to balance her internal life with the external world. Her world consists of glittering surfaces, such as fine fashion, parties, and high society, but as she moves through that world she probes beneath those surfaces in search of deeper meaning. Yearning for privacy, Clarissa has a tendency toward introspection that gives her a profound capacity for emotion, which many other characters lack. However, she is always concerned with appearances and keeps herself tightly composed, seldom sharing her feelings with anyone. She uses a constant stream of convivial chatter and activity to keep her soul locked safely away, which can make her seem shallow even to those who know her well.

Constantly overlaying the past and the present, Clarissa strives to reconcile herself to life despite her potent memories. For most of the novel she considers aging and death with trepidation, even as she performs life-affirming actions, such as buying flowers. Though content, Clarissa never lets go of the doubt she feels about the decisions that have shaped her life, particularly her decision to marry [Richard](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/richard-dalloway/) instead of [Peter Walsh](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/dalloway/character/peter-walsh/). She understands that life with Peter would have been difficult, but at the same time she is uneasily aware that she sacrificed passion for the security and tranquility of an upper-class life. At times she wishes for a chance to live life over again. She experiences a moment of clarity and peace when she watches her old neighbor through her window, and by the end of the day she has come to terms with the possibility of death. Like Septimus, Clarissa feels keenly the oppressive forces in life, and she accepts that the life she has is all she’ll get. Her will to endure, however, prevails.