

Re-reading the First Line of *Mrs Dalloway*: Sonic Attribution and the Marginal Audibility of Working-Class Women

This paper examines the sonic architecture of *Mrs Dalloway* by returning to a line whose interpretive possibilities have been noted but never fully pursued: ‘Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself’. Although some critics have suggested that this sentence may originate in servant speech, it is typically treated as the neutral report of an impersonal narrator. Yet its clipped rhythm and absence of speaker attribution bear the imprint of domestic service, producing what I call sonic attribution: speech present in the text but withheld as audible voice. Drawing on Ann Banfield’s theorisation of modernism’s ‘unspeakable sentences’ and Alison Light’s account of Woolf’s attunement to the sound-world of household labour, this paper argues that the novel opens with an unattributed act of working-class communication that Clarissa’s consciousness quickly overtakes.

Lucy’s appearance in the next paragraph as one of the household’s servants casts her as the likely source of the novel’s opening line. Following this lead, the article traces her speech across the text to examine how Woolf repeatedly positions her at the threshold of audibility: curtailed sentences, moments of voicelessness, and stifled attempts to cross classed acoustic boundaries. Her final direct mention subtly returns the reader to the novel’s first line, completing the sonic arc that structures the narrative and clarifying Woolf’s pointed handling of the unequal distribution of audibility across social ranks. Through this lens, *Mrs Dalloway* emerges as a study in how working-class women’s speech is registered yet marginalised within the politics of audibility—a dynamic that continues to shape debates over who is heard and who goes unheard today.

Bio

Dr Rhonda Mayne specialises in Virginia Woolf and women’s writing, with research interests in gesture, rhythm, dance, embodiment, and movement. She is concerned with recovering the voices of working-class women in modernist fiction and has an emerging interest in how digital mapping might illuminate patterns of movement in Woolf’s texts.