

“I Had Meant to Have Dancing’: The Dance Motif, Memory, and Social Aspiration in *Mrs Dalloway*, 100 Years On”

As the centenary of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) prompts renewed attention to Woolf’s modernist innovations, dance threads through Virginia Woolf’s novel, linking Clarissa’s memories, vitality, and the movement of everyday life. Early in the text, Woolf evokes “girls in muslin dresses dancing all night,” a vision of exuberance that Clarissa carries into adulthood. Her repeated remark about loving “dancing and all that” gestures beyond literal motion: the phrase “and all that” gathers everything involved with the dance — sociability, bodily pleasure, and the joy of shared experience. From this early image, dance becomes a motif for how consciousness registers vitality within the forms and expectations of social life, shaping Clarissa’s sense of what it means to move (or to be moved), in the modern world

Throughout the novel, dance intertwines with memory. As Clarissa, having rested on the sofa after luncheon, moves into the drawing-room—a space that suggests relative stillness—she perceives the chimes of Big Ben: “all sorts of little things came flooding and lapping and dancing in on the wake of that solemn stroke which lay flat like a bar of gold on the sea, Mrs. Marsham, Ellie Henderson, glasses for ices.” Even though her body is stationary, the clock’s stroke instigates a cascade of memories, many linked to social occasions, perhaps dances or gatherings, that animate her consciousness. The contrast between her physical stillness and the kinetic flow of recollection underscores how Woolf makes the rhythms of memory themselves dance, linking sensation, reflection, and social awareness.

Dance also frames social aspiration. At Clarissa’s party toward the end of the novel, she repeatedly notes, “I had meant to have dancing... But talk of dancing! The rooms were packed.” The physical crowding and social protocols confine movement and prevent literal dancing, contrasting the freedom of imagined or remembered dance with the constraints of social reality. In these moments, Woolf emphasises the interplay of limitation and desire: the dance motif measures not only vitality and memory but also the spaces in which life is possible. Social expectation channels experience, yet does not extinguish the energy of consciousness that perceives, recalls, and longs.

Dance also frames social aspiration. At Clarissa’s party toward the end of the novel, she repeatedly notes, “I had meant to have dancing... But talk of dancing! The rooms were packed.” The physical crowding and rigid social protocols prevent literal dance, contrasting sharply with the freedom of remembered or imagined movement. Here, the dance motif charts both desire and limitation: it reveals Clarissa’s vitality and memory while marking the boundaries imposed by social expectation. Even as her actions are constrained, her consciousness continues to perceive, recall, and long for experiences beyond the crowded, stifling spaces of the party.

Woolf structures time in *Mrs Dalloway* to underscore how dance embodies Clarissa’s memory, desire, and social awareness. The novel’s single-day framework allows rhythms of anticipation, recollection, and interaction to accumulate, punctuating the hours. The working title, *The Hours*, was fittingly chosen, as Harvena Richter notes. These temporal patterns give weight to moments of remembered or imagined dance, highlighting the interplay of vitality and constraint. As Paul Saint-Amour observes, the novel’s division into twelve sections presents it as a device for quantifying diurnal experience. Within this framework, dance, whether recalled from youth or imagined at the party, intersects with memory and aspiration,

showing how consciousness measures intensity even within the limits of social and temporal reality.

From youthful revelry to the crowded drawing-room, dance structures moments of memory and aspiration in *Mrs Dalloway*, marking the intensity of lived experience across the novel. It mediates between imagination and social expectation, youth and adulthood, stasis and motion, integrating personal experience with social life. In doing so, Woolf reveals how vitality is perceived, constrained, and remembered, and how consciousness navigates the rhythms of everyday existence. A century after its publication, *Mrs Dalloway* continues to demonstrate the subtle interplay of memory, desire, and temporal awareness, offering insight into the enduring complexity and dynamism of modernist consciousness.

Possible additions: Remembering dance allows Clarissa to picture radical reform for women: women have freedom, money, and new cultural and intellectual liberties. Memories of dance, then, mark their disengagement with the dominant culture.

This counters the static bodies squeezed into the drawing room at the end of the novel and the phrase 'I wanted to have dancing' becomes a lively vehicle with which to concretise (?) Woolf's attack on the dominant socio-political system.