

BELLS AND BATTLEFIELDS: TIME, MEMORY, AND THE GREAT WAR IN WOOLF'S NARRATIVE

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Annotation. This article explores the representation of time, memory, and the First World War in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Special attention is paid to the symbolism of Big Ben's bells and the battlefields of war as narrative devices that reveal the relationship between objective time and subjective memory. Through the experiences of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, the study examines trauma, mourning, and the enduring psychological consequences of war. Furthermore, the article highlights Woolf's use of the stream-of-consciousness technique to depict the complex interaction between memory, identity, and historical experience.

Keywords: time, memory, First World War, Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, traumatic memory, mourning, Big Ben, stream of consciousness, modernism.

Annotatsiya. Mazkur maqolada Virginia Woolfning *Mrs Dalloway* romanida vaqt, xotira va Birinchi jahon urushining badiiy talqini tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotda Big Ben qo'ng'iroqlari va urush maydonlari obrazlari orqali obyektiv vaqt hamda subyektiv xotira o'rtasidagi murakkab munosabatlar yoritilgan. Clarissa Dalloway va Septimus Warren Smith obrazlari misolida urushning inson ruhiyatiga ko'rsatgan uzoq muddatli ta'siri, travmatik xotira va motam jarayonlari tahlil etiladi. Shuningdek, Virginia Woolfning ong oqimi usuli yordamida vaqt va xotiraning badiiy ifodalanish mexanizmlari ochib beriladi.

Kalit so'zlar: vaqt, xotira, Birinchi jahon urushi, Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, travmatik xotira, motam, Big Ben, ong oqimi, modernizm.

Аннотация. В данной статье исследуются проблемы времени, памяти и художественного осмысления Первой мировой войны в романе Вирджинии Вулф *Mrs Dalloway*. Особое внимание уделяется символике колоколов Биг-Бена и образу поля боя как средства раскрытия взаимодействия объективного времени и субъективной памяти. На примере Клариссы Дэллоуэй и Септимуса Уоррена Смита анализируются последствия военной травмы, процессы скорби и сохранения памяти. Также рассматривается роль техники потока сознания в художественном изображении времени и памяти.

Ключевые слова: время, память, Первая мировая война, Вирджиния Вулф, *Mrs Dalloway*, травматическая память, скорбь, Биг-Бен, поток сознания, модернизм.

Introduction.

Virginia Woolf occupies a central place in twentieth-century literature because of her ability to transform ordinary experiences into profound explorations of human consciousness. Among her many achievements, her representation of time, memory, and historical trauma remains particularly influential. In her fiction, the external world is never merely a backdrop for events; rather, it becomes intertwined with the inner lives of characters whose thoughts, memories, and emotions shape the narrative itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel that examines the lingering effects of the First World War upon British society. The title “Bells and Battlefields: Time, Memory, and the Great War in Woolf's Narrative” captures the dual forces that dominate the novel. On one hand, there are the bells of London, especially the recurring chimes of Big Ben, which measure chronological time and impose order upon daily life. On the other hand, there are the battlefields of the Great War, whose memories continue to haunt individuals and communities long after the fighting has ceased. Woolf uses the interaction between these two forces to reveal the complex relationship between public history and private experience, demonstrating that the passage of time does not necessarily heal psychological wounds or erase traumatic memories.

The narrative of *Mrs Dalloway* unfolds during a single day in June 1923. At first glance, the novel appears remarkably simple in structure. Clarissa Dalloway prepares for an evening party while moving through the streets of London and reflecting upon her life. Yet beneath this seemingly ordinary plot lies an intricate exploration of consciousness. Woolf abandons conventional linear storytelling and instead constructs a narrative based upon shifting perspectives, fragmented memories, and fluid transitions between past and present. Through this technique, she challenges traditional notions of time as a straightforward sequence of events. In Woolf's fictional universe, the past remains active within the present, shaping perceptions, emotions, and identities. Time is not experienced as a linear progression but as a dynamic interplay between memory and immediate reality.

The recurring sound of Big Ben serves as one of the novel's most significant symbols. Throughout the narrative, the clock announces the passing hours, reminding characters and readers alike of the relentless movement of chronological time. The bells create a sense of order within the bustling city, marking divisions between moments and establishing a framework for daily activities. However, Woolf also reveals the limitations of mechanical time. While clocks measure external reality, they cannot capture the complexity of human consciousness. The characters' minds move freely across decades, revisiting childhood experiences, lost relationships, and traumatic events regardless of the hour indicated by the clock. Consequently, the bells

represent an external structure that contrasts with the fluid and unpredictable nature of memory.

For Clarissa Dalloway, time is inseparable from reflection and self-examination. As she walks through London preparing for her party, memories emerge unexpectedly, transporting her back to Bourton and her youth. The physical environment triggers recollections that blur the distinction between past and present. Clarissa remembers Peter Walsh, whose passionate and unpredictable personality once captivated her. She also recalls Sally Seton, whose independence and vitality represented possibilities that seemed unavailable within conventional social structures. These memories are not passive recollections but active forces shaping Clarissa's understanding of herself. The past exists alongside the present, influencing her emotions and perceptions.

Woolf's treatment of memory reflects broader modernist concerns regarding the nature of human experience. Modernist writers often rejected the idea that reality could be adequately represented through straightforward narratives. Instead, they emphasized subjectivity, fragmentation, and psychological complexity. Woolf extends these principles by presenting memory as a living process rather than a static archive. Characters do not simply remember events; they relive them, reinterpret them, and integrate them into their evolving sense of identity. Through this approach, Woolf demonstrates that memory constitutes an essential component of human existence.

The Great War occupies a central position within this framework of memory and time. Although the conflict remains largely absent from the novel's immediate action, its presence permeates nearly every aspect of the narrative. The war functions as a historical shadow extending across postwar society. Public celebrations, social gatherings, and everyday routines coexist with invisible wounds left by years of violence and loss. Woolf presents a society attempting to resume normal life while carrying the psychological burden of unprecedented destruction.

The character of Septimus Warren Smith embodies the war's enduring impact most directly. A veteran who fought on the Western Front, Septimus suffers from severe psychological trauma. His experiences during the war have shattered his ability to engage with reality in conventional ways. He experiences hallucinations, emotional numbness, and overwhelming feelings of guilt. Unlike many literary depictions of soldiers as heroic figures, Woolf portrays Septimus as a victim of forces beyond his control. His suffering reveals the human cost of war in deeply personal terms.

Septimus's memories of the battlefield illustrate Woolf's understanding of trauma. Traumatic experiences resist integration into ordinary consciousness. Rather than becoming part of a coherent narrative, they return unexpectedly and repeatedly, disrupting the distinction between past and present. Septimus cannot leave the battlefield behind because it continues to exist within his mind. The death of his friend Evans remains particularly significant. Although Evans died years earlier, Septimus

repeatedly imagines his presence. These visions demonstrate how traumatic memory transforms time itself. For Septimus, the war has not ended because its psychological effects continue to dominate his experience of reality.

The contrast between Clarissa and Septimus constitutes one of the novel's most compelling structural features. The two characters never meet, yet their experiences mirror and illuminate one another. Clarissa represents social integration, stability, and participation in public life, while Septimus embodies isolation, fragmentation, and psychological distress. Nevertheless, both characters grapple with questions of mortality, identity, and meaning. Through this parallel structure, Woolf suggests that the boundaries separating individual experiences are more permeable than they initially appear.

Time functions differently for Septimus than it does for Clarissa. While Clarissa's memories often evoke nostalgia and reflection, Septimus's memories generate terror and confusion. For him, time lacks continuity. Past events intrude upon present reality with overwhelming force, preventing him from establishing a stable sense of self. Woolf's depiction anticipates contemporary understandings of post-traumatic stress disorder, which recognize the persistence and involuntary nature of traumatic memories. Septimus's inability to escape the battlefield illustrates how trauma disrupts ordinary temporal experience.

The urban landscape of London serves as another important element in Woolf's exploration of time and memory. The city appears vibrant and dynamic, filled with movement, commerce, and social interaction. Yet beneath this surface lies an awareness of historical change and collective loss. Public monuments, government buildings, and familiar streets evoke memories of national history while simultaneously bearing witness to recent suffering. London becomes a space where personal and collective memories intersect.

The airplane that passes overhead early in the novel provides a revealing example of this intersection. Citizens pause to watch the aircraft trace mysterious letters across the sky. The scene reflects technological progress and modern spectacle, yet it also evokes memories of wartime aviation. The airplane functions as both a symbol of modernity and a reminder of conflict. Similarly, motorcars moving through the city generate excitement while recalling military authority and state power. Woolf repeatedly demonstrates how ordinary objects acquire historical significance through association and memory.

Mourning represents another crucial dimension of Woolf's narrative. The Great War produced unprecedented levels of loss, affecting millions of families across Europe. Traditional rituals of mourning proved inadequate for addressing the scale of destruction. Woolf captures this cultural crisis by portraying grief as an ongoing and

unresolved process. Characters continue to carry the dead within their memories, transforming absence into a persistent presence.

Septimus's relationship with Evans exemplifies this phenomenon. His inability to mourn successfully stems from the traumatic circumstances surrounding Evans's death. Rather than accepting the loss, Septimus experiences a form of psychological paralysis. The dead soldier remains vividly present within his consciousness. This persistence of memory challenges conventional distinctions between life and death, illustrating the profound effects of traumatic bereavement.

Clarissa's experience of mourning differs in important ways. Her losses involve unrealized possibilities, fading youth, and the passage of time itself. She mourns not only individuals but also alternative versions of her own life. Through Clarissa, Woolf explores subtler forms of grief that accompany aging and self-reflection. These experiences connect personal memory to broader questions regarding identity and mortality.

The party at the novel's conclusion serves as a symbolic culmination of these themes. On one level, the gathering celebrates social continuity and communal connection. Clarissa's efforts bring diverse individuals together, creating a temporary sense of unity. Yet the party also reveals the fragility of such connections. Beneath the surface of conversation and entertainment lies an awareness of isolation, mortality, and loss.

The announcement of Septimus's suicide during the party introduces a powerful moment of convergence. Although Clarissa never knew Septimus personally, his death profoundly affects her. Retreating briefly from her guests, she contemplates the significance of his act. In this moment, Woolf establishes an unexpected connection between two seemingly unrelated lives. Clarissa recognizes something meaningful in Septimus's refusal to surrender his inner reality to external pressures. His death forces her to confront fundamental questions regarding authenticity, individuality, and mortality.

This scene illustrates Woolf's broader understanding of empathy. Genuine human connection emerges not through shared circumstances but through recognition of common vulnerability. Clarissa and Septimus inhabit vastly different social worlds, yet both struggle with existential concerns arising from the passage of time and the inevitability of death. Their indirect relationship underscores the interconnected nature of human experience.

Woolf's narrative technique plays a crucial role in conveying these themes. The stream-of-consciousness method allows readers to move seamlessly between external events and internal reflections. This fluidity mirrors the operation of memory itself, where associations and emotions frequently override chronological sequence. Woolf's

prose captures the complexity of thought, demonstrating how individuals construct meaning through continuous interaction between past and present.

The novel's treatment of time also reflects philosophical debates that influenced modernist literature. Thinkers such as Henri Bergson distinguished between mechanical time and lived duration. Mechanical time consists of measurable units represented by clocks and calendars. Lived duration refers to subjective experience, in which moments blend together and memories remain active within consciousness. Woolf's narrative embodies this distinction by juxtaposing the regular chimes of Big Ben with the fluid movement of memory.

The Great War intensifies these temporal complexities. Historical events of extraordinary magnitude disrupt ordinary patterns of experience, altering perceptions of both past and future. Woolf portrays postwar society as suspended between remembrance and recovery. Individuals seek to rebuild their lives while remaining haunted by memories they cannot fully assimilate. This tension defines the emotional atmosphere of the novel.

The symbolism of bells and battlefields encapsulates Woolf's central insight regarding the relationship between time and memory. Bells represent order, continuity, and the forward movement of history. Battlefields symbolize trauma, loss, and the persistence of the past. The interaction between these symbols reveals the limitations of chronological narratives that portray war as a completed event. For Woolf, the war continues wherever memories remain active, wherever grief remains unresolved, and wherever psychological wounds resist healing.

Ultimately, Mrs Dalloway presents a vision of human existence shaped by both temporal progression and enduring memory. Woolf demonstrates that individuals inhabit multiple temporal dimensions simultaneously. They move through the present while carrying fragments of the past and imagining uncertain futures. The Great War intensifies this condition, transforming memory into a site of both suffering and meaning. Through her innovative narrative techniques and profound psychological insight, Woolf reveals how historical events become embedded within personal consciousness.

"Bells and Battlefields: Time, Memory, and the Great War in Woolf's Narrative" therefore captures the essence of Woolf's artistic achievement. The bells of London continue to mark the passing hours, yet the echoes of distant battlefields remain audible within the minds of those who survived. Time advances relentlessly, but memory refuses simple closure. In Woolf's narrative world, the past is never entirely past. It lives within consciousness, shaping identity, influencing perception, and connecting individuals across social boundaries. Through this exploration of time, memory, and war, Woolf created a literary masterpiece that continues to illuminate the enduring relationship between history and human experience.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* presents a profound exploration of the relationship between time, memory, and the enduring legacy of the First World War. Through the symbolic opposition of Big Ben's bells and the memories of distant battlefields, Woolf demonstrates that chronological time cannot erase the psychological effects of trauma. The experiences of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith reveal different yet interconnected responses to memory, loss, and mortality. Woolf's innovative stream-of-consciousness technique enables readers to perceive time not as a linear sequence of events but as a fluid interaction between past and present. The novel ultimately suggests that war continues to exist in memory long after its official conclusion, shaping individual identities and collective consciousness. By intertwining personal recollection with historical experience, Woolf creates a powerful narrative that remains relevant to contemporary discussions of trauma, remembrance, and the human condition.

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