

VIRGINIA WOOLF MRS DALLOWAY

MICHAEL H. WHITWORTH



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Virginia Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*

MICHAEL H. WHITWORTH

Consultant Editor: NICOLAS TREDELL



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For Roxanne and George

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ABBREVIATIONS

In-text references to Woolf's works use the following abbreviations:

CSF *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. S. Dick, revised edition. London: Hogarth, 1989.

D *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. A. O. Bell and A. McNeillie, 5 vols. London: Hogarth, 1977–84.

E *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. A. McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols. London: Hogarth, 1996–2011.

L *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. N. Nicolson and J. Trautmann Banks, 6 vols. London: Hogarth, 1975–80.

MD *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. D. Bradshaw. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

ROO *A Room of One's Own* in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. M. Shiach. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

TL *To the Lighthouse*, ed. D. Bradshaw. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

In Chapter Eight, *Hours* denotes Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998); in other chapters, it denotes Helen Wussow's 1996 edition of the manuscript of Woolf's novel.

All quotations from *Mrs Dalloway* are referenced to David Bradshaw's Oxford World's Classics edition, regardless of the edition used by the critic. In a small number of cases, due either to critics misquoting, or to variations between editions, the quotations in the text are not identical to those in the Oxford World's Classics text. Similarly, references to Woolf's essays are keyed to the *Essays of Virginia Woolf*.

INTRODUCTION

■ The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all; and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room, we see how complete the story is, how profound, [...]. (E3 35) □

Virginia Woolf's remarks in 'Modern Novels' (April 1919) about the story 'Gusev' by Anton Chekhov could equally well apply to the novel she would publish six years later, *Mrs Dalloway*. Without a plot in the conventional sense, and without chapter divisions, it lacks the conventional scaffolding of the novel as it was then understood; this, and the richness of its prose, allow readers great freedom about where to place the emphasis. Although the novel's focus on its titular central character makes *Mrs Dalloway* easier to discern than the crepuscular scene imagined by Woolf, readers have disagreed about the relative importance of Septimus Warren Smith and Peter Walsh; although readers have appreciated the clarity of temporal structure created by the chimes of Big Ben, they have recognized that clock time is an artificial structure.

When Woolf published the novel, the academic study of English literature was in its infancy, and the diverse approaches taken to *Mrs Dalloway* record the history of a discipline that has constantly innovated and that has been characterized by self-reflexive debate about its fundamental aims. The approaches taken also register, though not always directly, the changing social composition of the student body, and social movements and historical events from beyond the world of literature. It is unimaginable that a novel so concerned with women's place in society, with war, and with madness, could not have been interpreted differently in the ages of the second wave of feminism, the Vietnam War, and the anti-psychiatry movement.

When Virginia Woolf first conceived of *Mrs Dalloway* in August 1922, it was as a short story, 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street'; Clarissa Dalloway and her politician husband Richard had been minor characters in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). By October 1922, the narrative had developed into a book, though Woolf would still make use of the short story, publishing it in the American periodical *The Dial* in July 1923. By June 1923 she was referring to the book as

'The Hours', and it is under that title that her surviving manuscript draft has been edited by Helen Wussow. The discrepancies between the story, the manuscript and the published text have been valuable to scholars. Woolf finished her first draft in October 1924 (D2 316), and soon after began revisions; she had sent it off to the printers by the first week of 1925. Curiously, she could not leave the characters behind, and she wrote six more 'Mrs Dalloway' stories between March and May 1925, though they were not published in her lifetime; they were first gathered together as *Mrs Dalloway's Party*, in an edition by Stella McNichol, and are now reprinted in the *Complete Shorter Fiction*. *Mrs Dalloway* itself was published in Britain by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's own firm, The Hogarth Press, on 14 May 1925, and in America on the same day by Harcourt Brace.¹ In 1928 Harcourt Brace brought out the 'Modern Library' edition of the novel; in the introduction that she wrote specially for that edition, Woolf spoke of Septimus as Clarissa's 'double' (E4 549), a remark that has been particularly influential.

The remarks that Woolf made about *Mrs Dalloway* in her diaries have been important to critics. They first became widely available with Leonard Woolf's selection from the diaries, *A Writer's Diary* (1953), and available in full when the second volume of the five-volume edition appeared in 1978. Particular prominence has been given to her claim that 'I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense' (D2 248). Such remarks have often been taken as insights into Woolf's true intentions, but it should be recognized that her diary was written with an audience in mind, at least indirectly. One such audience was an older Virginia, reading the diary as she wrote her memoirs; another was her husband Leonard. Moreover, her discussions of her works are often framed by references to other writers and to critical responses: the remark about having 'too many ideas' sprang from Woolf's seeing a posthumously published remark by her contemporary Katherine Mansfield; in the same entry, her remarks about creating memorable characters are in dialogue with the novelist and critic Arnold Bennett. The diaries are valuable sources, but need to be taken with a pinch of salt, understood not as direct revelations but as fragments of dialogues. And while Woolf's 1928 Introduction to the 'Modern Library' edition was intended as a public document, it does not necessarily embody the whole truth. Woolf's claim that Septimus was intended to be Clarissa's 'double' has generated as much disagreement as it has insight. It is worth remembering the remark about Woolf's friend T. S. Eliot: 'in the course of time a poet may become merely a reader in respect to his own works, forgetting his

original meaning – or without forgetting, merely changing'.² On this basis, one might number Woolf's diary entries and her Introduction among the early responses.

Critical movements and practices do not appear and disappear instantaneously on the chime of midnight as one decade passes into another. Critics continue to work in an older mode, and to produce insightful work, even when critical trends have moved on; emergent critical practices sometimes articulate themselves in an inherited idiom; monographs rework critical articles published many years previously. For these reasons, the present guide divides Woolf criticism not into rigid chronological segments, but into eight phases.

Chapter One takes in a span of fifty years, from the first reviews of *Mrs Dalloway* to Avrom Fleishman's reading of it in *Virginia Woolf* (1975), and is itself chronologically subdivided. The first section examines the reviews that appeared on publication of the novel in 1925. The second considers comments that appeared during Woolf's lifetime in articles and in the first three critical books on her work, and sees the establishment of one line of opposition from the writers associated with the journal *Scrutiny*. The third section considers the sympathetic accounts by Bennett and Blackstone that appeared in the 1940s after Woolf's death. The final section of the chapter turns to three accounts of *Mrs Dalloway* that appeared when the close-reading mode of New Criticism was at its height.

It is widely accepted that Woolf's critical fortunes suffered in the twenty-five years after her death. Chapter Two examines the recovery of her reputation in the late 1960s, occasioned by a revival of interest in the Bloomsbury Group and by the 'second wave' of feminism. By this time, modernist literature had become part of the syllabus on most English literature degrees, but the canon was shaped around the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot and the fiction of James Joyce. One struggle for *Mrs Dalloway* was to be seen as something more or other than a copy of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the chapter considers Patrick Parrinder and Hugh Kenner, of the hostile critics, and Carolyn Heilbrun and Harvena Richter of the sympathetic ones. The recovery of Woolf was a recovery of the political dimension of her work. While this recovery gathered pace in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, as far back as 1958 Ralph Samuelson had expressed frustration with the formalist mode of criticism, and his article is examined in some detail, followed by works by Herbert Marder (1968) and Lee R. Edwards (1977).

Another way of freeing Woolf from formalism, and of countering the *Scrutiny* charge that her work lacks a sense of values, was to relate it to a system of philosophy, and Chapter Three examines the various forms

such work can take. It returns to the earliest reviews to establish the origins of this critical tendency, before making a survey of articles and books from 1946 to 2000; it takes in Woolf as a Bergsonian, an existentialist, a phenomenologist and an epistemologist.

Chapter Four turns to the influence of structuralist and post-structuralist literary theory in the period 1977 to 1991. Structuralism as a movement in linguistics began with the posthumously published lectures of Ferdinand de Saussure, and as a movement in anthropology it was established by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss in the 1950s and 1960s; French literary critics, notably Roland Barthes, worked in a structuralist mode in the 1960s, but it became known as a movement in the English-speaking world only in the late 1960s and 1970s. It was soon overtaken by post-structuralist thought that was sceptical about the claims of structuralism to be a 'scientific' method and that questioned the stability of structure. The chapter considers works by David Lodge, Nancy Armstrong, Teresa L. Ebert, Edward Bishop, Herbert Marder and Pamela Caughie.

Chapter Five examines the history of psychoanalytic criticism of Woolf. While there was a brief flurry of interest in the 1950s centred on the journal *Literature and Psychology*, psychoanalytic work came into its own only when relevant autobiographical texts had been published in the 1970s. The chapter considers work by Mark Spilka and Suzette Henke in a Freudian tradition, before turning to critics who, under the influence of feminism and structuralism, broke with Freudian assumptions: Elizabeth Abel, Jean Wyatt and Makiko Minow-Pinkney. It then turns to the problem of mourning in *Mrs Dalloway*, as considered by Susan Bennett Smith and Christine Froula, and to work on trauma by Marlene Briggs and Karen DeMeester.

For many years Woolf's lesbian sexuality was ignored, or conflated with the ideal of androgyny that she advocated for writers in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The turning point came with the publication of important theoretical works by Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich in 1979 and 1980. Furthermore, under the influence of Michel Foucault, critics began to recognize the historical variability of conceptions both of sexuality and of the body, concepts previously understood as biological, natural and historically invariable. Chapter Six considers questions of sexuality and the body, beginning with Emily Jensen on Clarissa's lesbianism, turning to George Ella Lyon, Teresa Fulker and William Greenslade on the body, and then returning to a more historicized conception of lesbian culture in works by Patricia Cramer and Eileen Barrett.

Historicist approaches to *Mrs Dalloway* may be traced to Alex Zwerdling's pioneering essay 'Mrs Dalloway and the Social System' (1977), but the advance of historicist work was impeded by an association with stolidly traditional scholarship; however, in the course of the 1980s the New Historicism, beginning as a movement in early modern studies, won acceptance for historicisms old and new. Chapter Seven begins by tracing another origin of historicization in Woolf studies, the historical reconstruction of the Bloomsbury Group, before turning to Alex Zwerdling and the Foucauldian work of Jeremy Tambling. It then considers three themes that have been particularly important for historicist critics: war (in the work of Sue Thomas, Karen Levenback, David Bradshaw and Masami Usui); empire and global politics (in the work of Trudi Tate and Kathy Phillips); and the city (in the work of Susan Merrill Squier, Reginald Abbott, Leena Kore Schröder and Rachel Bowlby). Finally, it examines two historicist approaches to Bloomsbury in an essay by Brian Shaffer and a co-authored piece by Elyse Graham and Pericles Lewis. Creative works may constitute an oblique form of commentary on and criticism of earlier works, and in Chapter Eight I turn to criticism that takes as its starting point Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998).

The conclusion asks why perceptions of *Mrs Dalloway* have changed over the ninety years since its publication, and considers how and why critical agendas might change in the coming years. It notes some recent trends in modernist studies, such as transnationalism, and recent growth areas in Woolf studies, such as ecocriticism and animal studies.

Mrs Dalloway has stimulated an extraordinary range of responses and interpretations. Nevertheless, certain scenes have been of recurrent interest: the scene in which Clarissa contemplates the 'something central which permeated', culminating in the image of 'a match burning in a crocus' (MD 27), which has been particularly important for considerations of sexuality; Clarissa's consideration of her dispersed identity, in her own thoughts (MD 8) and as recalled by Peter (MD 129–30); the scene in which Clarissa contemplates Septimus's suicide, the 'thing... that mattered' and the 'it' which he had flung away (MD 156); and the moment that follows in which she decides that she 'must go back' to her party (MD 158).

Moreover, certain questions about *Mrs Dalloway* have recurred through its history, sometimes tackled consciously by critics, sometimes answered implicitly. Critics have been unable to agree about whether the novel has one, two or three central characters. In 1945 Joan Bennett

identified five, though she gave greater prominence to Clarissa and Peter than to the other three, Richard, Septimus and Rezia.³ In 1960 Frank Bradbrook, a critic unsympathetic to Woolf, dismissed the Septimus scenes as a 'macabre ... episode'.⁴ Others have seen the parallel between Clarissa and Septimus as essential. Critics have been uncertain whether the novel celebrates Clarissa as a heroine (see, for example, Lucio Ruotolo) or satirizes her (for example, Trudi Tate). They have been puzzled by the novel's unsympathetic presentation of Miss Kilman, given that it presents Clarissa's attraction to Sally Seton sympathetically. Readers of the present guide will discover other recurring points of interest.

CHAPTER ONE

Early Responses

Reviews (1925–1926)

Woolf's earliest reviewers were mostly writing for daily newspapers or for weekly reviews that combined political commentary with critical reviews of the arts. They were concerned to place *Mrs Dalloway* in relation to other works, to explain to their readers what kind of work it was, and to indicate where the centre of interest might lie. They were not, on the whole, concerned to make interpretative statements, though some reviews anticipate later critical concerns; nor were they particularly alert to the politics of the novel.

The title created the focus for many reviewers, with the result that most accounts fail to differentiate Septimus Warren Smith and Peter Walsh from the other more fleeting characters and observers, and so accord them little significance. The first review to appear, on 14 May 1925, in the English-language Welsh newspaper the *Western Mail*, registered some confusion: 'Mrs Dalloway doesn't interest us very much, nor do any of the characters drawn into this somewhat bewildering jumble. Something might have been made of Rezia Warren Smith, the Italian wife of a lunatic ex-soldier, if she had been allowed to evolve naturally. The remainder of the people, who skip into a page and out of it with no apparent purpose, are of no consequence.'¹ In a more perceptive review which appeared on the same day in the feminist political weekly *Time and Tide*, Sylvia Lynd (c.1888–1952) took Woolf to task for imposing Septimus on the narrative. Whenever Clarissa appears, she said, 'we, like her friends and lovers, rejoice and admire her'.² Lynd believed that Clarissa should have dominated the narrative.

■ As it is, some of the minor characters take far too much room. Septimus Warren Smith, the wretched neurotic, is a huge piece of irrelevance. I don't believe in the coincidences of Peter Walsh's seeing him on his way to visit the mental specialist in the morning and on the way to the mortuary after committing suicide in the afternoon. I refuse to accept him from Mrs Woolf as a character at all. □

She felt that Septimus was an unconvincing copy of Leonard Bast in E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), and implied he better belonged in one of John Galsworthy's realist and socially committed novels: 'He lives in "Howards End" talking about "dear R. L. S." [i.e. Robert Louis Stevenson] and for the last dozen years he has been visiting Mr Galsworthy.' In a remark that anticipates the concerns of later critics, she recognized that he brought 'a touch of the dark tragic side of things'; but she felt that 'his appearance as the thought of a doctor and the "news-item" of a bore would have been enough'.³

Another perceptive and reflective review, by the novelist and critic Richard Hughes (1900–76), appeared on 16 May. However, for all his perceptiveness, when Hughes turned to summarizing the story, he identified the 'sole principal event' as the return of Peter Walsh. He went on to explain that other characters 'are in many cases not even acquainted with the principals – sometimes simply people they pass in the street, or even people who merely see the same aeroplane in the sky. Towards the end, one of these strangers flings himself from a window.'⁴ The dismissive description partly serves to demonstrate the inadequacy of a plot summary to this novel – 'Chronicle is an ass', says Hughes – but Hughes's near-omission of Septimus suggests that he failed to perceive the character's place in the pattern. On 21 May, the *Times Literary Supplement's* reviewer, Arthur Sydney McDowall (1877–1933), while recognizing that Septimus has his own distinct story, and that it made a 'poignant' contrast to that of Clarissa, nevertheless expressed the view that it compromised the design of the novel; McDowall had emphasized the importance of fluidity in the novels; Septimus's tragedy made 'a block in the tideway now and then'.⁵ The *New Statesman's* reviewer gave a fuller account of Septimus's story than many, but, like Sylvia Lynd, was not altogether convinced of its place in the novel. Quoting the passage in which Clarissa reflects that Septimus's death was 'somehow her disaster—her disgrace' (*MD* 157), the reviewer remarks that 'any tragedy would have served for that contrast; the artificial link is purely redundant, purely improbable, purely pointless. It is the sort of coincidence which mars the conventional novel; but it is less distracting there, because there it at any rate serves a purpose'.⁶

In defining what kind of work *Mrs Dalloway* was, many reviewers identified it with Woolf's technical experiments. However, many recognized that Woolf's experiments were not entirely unprecedented. Arthur McDowall noted that the idea of compressing the action into one day, 'though new enough to be called an experiment', was 'not [...] unique in modern fiction', and pointed to the precedent of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). An American reviewer of *Mrs Dalloway*, Joseph Wood Krutch, later described Woolf as 'a sort of decorous James Joyce', and

in doing so anticipated a line of criticism that saw the novel as an imitation of Joyce's work.⁷ In the *Daily News* on 28 May, Naomi Royde-Smith (1875–1964) highlighted what we would now call interior monologue or free indirect discourse, the 'method of telling a story in the medium of the unspoken thought which runs along just below the surface of our apprehension of events'.⁸ The method was no longer new, any more than the method of 'filling a full-length novel with the contents of one single day'; Royde-Smith pointed not only to the precedent of *Ulysses*, but also to *Pilgrimage* (the first volume of which had appeared in 1915) by Dorothy Richardson (1873–1957), and to *Mary Olivier* (1919) by May Sinclair (1863–1946). Nevertheless, Royde-Smith felt that Woolf had used these devices 'with a difference'. She remarked upon the complex combination of tones and modes that the novel embodied:

■ The book is a satire, it encloses a raw and jagged tragedy, it flays a sentimentalist and exposes a professional incapacity as it gathers momentum for the evanescent thrill of the party which is its climax. But all these things are accomplished in an atmosphere of sunlit retrospect, prosperous and intelligent enjoyment of the moment, laughter, and the clear beauty of an ordered household, an inherited culture, a gay considerate civilisation; and they combine and coalesce in a whole the completed effect of which is the most finished Mrs Woolf's individual and careful art has yet so far achieved.⁹ □

In seeking to place the quality of Woolf's experimentation, several reviewers reached for other arts. Richard Hughes noted that Woolf not only portrayed London vividly, but she did so with a sense of form: 'As well as the power of brilliant evocation she has that creative faculty of form which differs from mechanism: the same quality as Cézanne.' Hughes would probably have known of the importance of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) to Woolf's circle, and of his prominence in the Post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912 organized by Woolf's friend, the art theorist and painter Roger Fry (1866–1934). Though form in a novel was different from form in a painting, Hughes argued that 'it is not by its vividness that [Woolf's] writing ultimately stays in the mind, but by the coherent and processional form which is composed of, and transcends, that vividness'. The complexity of structure and of movement in the novel led Woolf's friend Gwen Raverat to remark that 'it's like a ballet [...] All the movements in different directions both in time and in space.'¹⁰ For Helen McAfee writing in *the Yale Review* in January 1926, 'In the structural perfection with which the themes are developed and held together, it is akin to an orchestral composition.'¹¹

Comparisons to other arts were not always flattering. The *New Statesman's* reviewer suggested that Woolf's method was not as original