

## Modernism in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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**Abstract:** Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) enjoys worldwide reputation among modern writers for her art of the stream-of-consciousness in the 20th century. *Mrs. Dalloway* is the representative novel in which Woolf well practices her writing skills and finds her true voice, drawing many researchers' attention. This paper stands the point -- modernism, which responds to literature and society, alternation of space and time arranged by Woolf under the influence of Einstein's modern science theories, and the disillusionment of Septimus Warren Smith discarded by his so-called modern society after World War I.

**Keywords:** Mrs. Dalloway; Virginia Woolf; Septimus Warren Smith; Space and Time

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### Introduction

In the summer of 1922, not very long after the World War I, traumas on people still haunting, new innovations infiltrated into human life, "Virginia Woolf's mind was a catalyst, illuminated by the readings of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. Echoes of both are heard throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*, submerged, transformed forged by Woolf into a new combination, a feminine quest to buy flowers and give a party in a social land shaken to its core." (Woolf I) *Mrs. Dalloway* is a stream-of-consciousness book, focused on the interior and mental world of people, the division between space and time vague, but it can't be defined that there is no connection between the book and what was at that time.

"Modernism is a philosophical movement that, along with cultural trends and changes, arose from wide-scale and far-reaching transformations in Western society in the late 19th late century and early 20th century. Among the factors that shaped Modernism were the development of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities, followed by the horror of World War I." (Lewis 38-39) Books are the flowers or fruits suck here or there on a tree which has its roots deep down in the earth of the times, the reality. *Mrs. Dalloway* and Modernism born at the same period, it seems inescapably to found each between them.

This paper will discuss modernism through analyzing the text of *Mrs. Dalloway* from two perspectives: Firstly, Virginia Woolf entangles space and time under the influence of Einstein's relativity theories to reveal her characters in a relative London. This part will focus on Mrs. Dalloway who spends the day on Bond Street and simultaneously reminisces the youth, and analyze from the characteristic of modernism which responds to the scientific innovation, regarded as the engine of modern industrial societies. Secondly, a reflection of Modernism that Septimus Warren Smith abandoned by his society, and given care which doesn't match its materials, will show to the readers.

### 1. A Relative Modernity in Space and Time

"As numerous critics have made clear, Virginia Woolf was fascinated by science. Not only did she feel compelled to write about the technology it produced, but several prominent scientists appear by name in her work as well." (Tolliver Brown 20) Einstein appears when Mr. Bentley enumerates achievements of human (Woolf 21). Therefore, many scholars trace the ways that Einstein's theories of relativity shape Virginia Woolf's works. Einstein proposed his special theories of reality in 1905, but the general theory was published till 1916. "Virginia Woolf's intellectual pursuits and her social and professional contact with prominent members of the scientific community afforded her an intimate knowledge of the advancements taking place in the field of physics." (Tolliver Brown 21) It's plausible that Einstein's theories of relativity make a contribution to her understanding of space and time in *Mrs. Dalloway*. "Einstein

proposed that the identity of any single entity could only be understood in relation to all others, in essence, that the universe should be conceived as a vast web of interrelationship, Woolf presents the properties of space and time in her fictional texts not as though they were a static stage for events (the Newtonian and Victorian approach), but as though they operated interactively.” (Tolliver Brown 22) In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the perceptions of space and time are directly linked to the setting they inhabit, which is distinctly relative.

The writer launches the story that Clarissa Dalloway roams on the street of London to buy flowers for her own party. “How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did...” (Woolf 3). The sightseeing on June morning brings her to the old day, when she was only eighteen with her affectionate lover, Peter Walsh. “For having lived in Westminster --- how many years now? over twenty... a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes... The leaden circles dissolved in the air. ” (Woolf 3-4) Westminster Palace and Big Ben are both landmarks of London, and the bell of Big Ben drags Clarissa out of reminiscence of her past. The bell of Big Ben spans the entire length of the novel, not only a reminder of present to Clarissa, but a device to exchange the space and time to avoid the confusion of readers under such stream-of-consciousness narration. In fact, because characters in this novel can get the time by their waist watches, obviously Big Bell mostly prepared for readers, who tend to assume that people on London Street share the same space and time with Big Bell. Woolf consistently distinguishes between the past on which characters ruminate and the present in which they now live by situating them in specific spots on the map. The dimensions created by Woolf set characters in a relative setting, where time and space are dynamic, but it is not a chaotic. Einstein’s relativity theories of modern science contribute to the arrangement of space and time in this novel embodies the modernity of Woolf’s view in space and time.

As Mrs. Dalloway continues her shopping on the street, some modern innovations like motorcar come into her sight, also catch many people’s eyes. Shortly afterward, an airplane overhead replaces the central presence of the motorcar.

Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol (so it seemed to Mr Bentley, vigorously rolling his strip of turf at Greenwich) of man’s soul; of his determination, thought Mr Bentley, sweeping round the cedar tree, to get outside his body, beyond his house, by means of thought, Einstein, speculation, mathematics, the Mendelian theory -- away the aeroplane shot. (Woolf 21)

The aeroplane scene combines many of perspectives relevant to Virginia Woolf’s modernism: intellectual, technological, social, and literary. These innovations come into light after World War I seem to present class conflict, capitalist consumerism, and the bright future of scientific field. The aeroplane, as the most impressive artifact of scientific achievements, suggests that modernism is also a response to technological innovation, which is engine of industrial society, particularly in the urban environment. As the setting Greenwich suggests, it explored the nature of time. The distinction between psychological time and clock time, underlines the modernist experiments with time and narrative form. Whitworth speculates that “by placing Mr. Bentley at Greenwich, and the aeroplane above it, alludes to Einstein’s role in changing ideas of space and time”(186).

## 2. Septimus Warren Smith’s Disillusion

*Mrs. Dalloway* was written after World War I, a catastrophically accidental war much more because of incompetence than villainy related to World War II. Under such terrible circumstances where many soldiers died, this burden would have been difficult to bear, but other factors also increased the psychological and emotional damage. This novel deplores the world’s cruelty expressed by the sufferings of Septimus Smith, a man shattered by the war and treated by society in an unkind and uncharitable manner. This part will manifest disappointments of modern society after WWI by analyzing Septimus Warren Smith’s disillusionment.

“Dr Holmes examined him. There was nothing whatever the matter, said Dr Holmes.” (Woolf 67) Rezia with a relief, regards Dr Holmes as the angel to rescue her and her husband. But as Septimus Smith become worse, Rezia turns help to another doctor Sir William. “It was merely a question of rest, said Sir William; of rest, rest, rest; a long rest in bed.”(Woolf 71) When Sir William was making a diagnosis on Septimus Smith, he proposed many questions about his soldier’s experiences. This doctor seems to show his respect and admire to the man who contribute himself to his Europe, but then Sir William’s treat to a veteran reveals his hypocrisy, which is circulated in society, led by the government. Septimus Smith chooses to suicide himself at last, but who should be responsible for his death. Rising from a mental abyss, if tentatively, Septimus does not want to die, yet seconds later he commits

suicide. “Desperately needing love, Septimus cannot find it in himself, and Rezia’s love is ultimately not enough; he certainly finds no love in society.”(Bethea 251) Septimus’s case highlights the fashion in which society expected the war veteran to return to normalcy immediately, showing little patience with and even marginalising those who could not instantly conform. But even more importantly, Septimus’s case allows Woolf to launch a sustained attack on the medical community of her time. Septimus Warren Smith ,shaped by the World WarI, the physics and the technology advancement, all the settings of his society, unfortunately becomes an outcast of his society and his comrades. Virginia Woolf creates a typical character compared with the “perfected hostess” *Mrs. Dalloway*, depicting a broken world after the World WarI, shows the evil of the modern 1920s, when the urbanization was advanced, and the materials were rich enough, but the care for people, especially for the veterans didn’t keep the pace. Ultimately, many thousands of people like Septimus Smith became the sacrifices of his times.

## Conclusion

We trace steps of Mrs. Dalloway, roaming on the London street, in and out of her thought shifting between the past and the present. As modernism is the development of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities, science is the engine. Although the writers intentionally interrupt readers’ understandings about where the character really was and what time exact was under the guide of modern science theories of Einstein’s relativity, we still can avoid the puzzle and get the access to this stream-of-consciousness novel. The aeroplane here not only marks the achievement of industrial societies, but contributes to the arrangement of space and time as a reference object. Woolf depicts a complicated and highly interconnected British society, full of materials, traumas,and confusions, which shaped Septimus Warren Smith and also cause devastation to him. Septimus is a miniature of his society, not the only one suffering the post war era , nor the only one like an outcast and committing suicide, who is the sacrifice during the advances of urbanization after World WarI. As a human creation, *Mrs. Dalloway* is inevitably branded by its times, modernism, which in return exerts big influence on modern literature. That is what we should find consciously out of such a stream-of-consciousness book, and then get a better understanding.

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