

Deconstructive Time and Space in Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract: First published in 1925, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf charts a single day in the life of two main characters whose paths never cross, namely Clarissa Dalloway, the wife of an upper-middle-class politician, and Septimus Smith, a shell-shocked First World War veteran. Within the twenty-four hours in the text, Mrs. Dalloway encompasses years of fragmentary memory and interior turmoil. As a trailblazing modernist novel, its organic and acrobatic narrative mechanism of time and space has influenced many other equally prominent contemporary novelists, such as Gabriel García Márquez. Based on the thoughts of deconstruction, this paper will seek to crystallize the aesthetic traces of cubism and subsequently the iterability of spatiotemporal symbols in *Mrs. Dalloway*, which are both conducive to the dissemination of binary themes in the novel, be they past and present, sanity and insanity, being and nothingness, life and death, echoing the universal and philosophical struggles that go beyond time and space.

1. Aesthetic Traces of Cubism

Set in London in the middle of June of 1923, *Mrs. Dalloway* is anchored around two main characters whose paths never cross. Clarissa Dalloway is a prosperous member of London society and the wife of a upper-middle-class politician, and Septimus Smith is a First World War veteran suffering from shell shock and bipolar disorder. Within the time frame of just one day in the text, Virginia Woolf is unrelenting in her quest to connect years of fragmentary memory and interior turmoil of the protagonists. By adopting the literary approach of stream of consciousness, the novelist enables a model reader to negotiate the gaps and differences of time and space through multiple interwoven stories. Harold Bloom emphasizes Walter Pater's influence on Virginia Woolf's writing by stating that, like Pater and like Nietzsche, Woolf should be best described as an apocalyptic aesthete, for whom human existence and the world are finally justified only as aesthetic phenomena^[1]. Bloom also renders Woolf's religion as Paterian aestheticism, eventually the worship of art. Walter Pater has once be defined as an impressionist writer who fuses the transcendent subjectivity of romanticism and the omniscient objectivity of realism toward a kind of utopian compensation for modern alienation^[2]. Similarly, the thought of cubism that one may allow different views of subjects together in the same picture bears an striking resemblance to Virginia Woolf's refusal of linear narrative in writing, positively entailing constant crystallization by literary analysts. When it comes to the theoretical framework of this paper, the author will turn to the thoughts of deconstruction. Derrida and many other researchers of deconstruction have expounded the emphasis on différance, the denial of logocentrism, the deconstruction of traditional structures, and the afterlife of uncertainty,

which will unleash creativity and possibility in a text^[3]. It should be conclusively shown that the thoughts of deconstruction obviously conform to the non-linear and palimpsest fabric of narrative in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

1.1. Non-linear Narrative

Mrs. Dalloway is anchored around the parallel stories of two strangers, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, and ends with Clarissa hearing about the suicide of Septimus at the party, with whom she subsequently and magically identifies. In line with Henri Bergson's time theory that there are two fundamentally different conceptions of time, the measurable, linear time and the subjective, experiential time, the moments of experiential time in *Mrs. Dalloway* can be considered as flashbacks triggered by memory^[4]. Apart from the flashbacks that persist throughout the novel, Woolf blurs the distinction between objective description and subjective memory, allowing omniscient narration and interior monologue to intertwine and interact with each other. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, most of what happens is narrated by the interior monologues of numerous characters, mainly including Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith and Peter Walsh. With such employment of non-linear narrative, coupled with the literary device of stream of consciousness, different voices are conspiring together to both unify and fragment the time and the space in this novel.

1.2. Difference of Parallel Voices

Although Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith never meet, the parallel stories interweave, with the two characters bordering on the two different selves of Virginia Woolf. Similarities between Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus Smith abound in the sense that they both feel lonely and lost. While Septimus Smith suffers from shell shock and horrific hallucinations, Clarissa Dalloway has great difficulty in tackling the haunting memories of her youth. But the different endings of the two parallel and similar stories, as Woolf's effort to render the contrast between life and death, do matter. In this novel, thematic structure is supported by more than one pair of binary opposition, such as past and present, sanity and insanity, being and nothingness, life and death. When Clarissa Dalloway hears of the death of Septimus Smith, the geography structure is deconstructed, and so does the thematic structure.

Paul Cézanne, whose works fall into the category of post-impressionism or cubism, has once painted one jug from two different perspectives: one in profile at eye-level for the body of the jug, the other from above looking down its neck^[5]. Called as "the father of us all" by Picasso, Cézanne is the first artist to paint using two eyes, the thought of whom conforms to the writing philosophy of Virginia Woolf to a certain extent. Furthermore, Derrida has coined the neologism *différance*, roughly meaning both to defer and to differ. Derrida puts forward a well-known statement that *différance* refers to the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are related to each other^[6]. As such, in the novel, the different choices of life and death in the final scene is instrumental in mirroring the different perspectives in one very picture. Importantly, the frequent and subtle adoption of spatiotemporal symbols in *Mrs. Dalloway* is evidently part of what it takes to make this type of acrobatic and inspiring narrative possible.

2. Iterability of Spatiotemporal Symbols

The mechanism of cubism lends itself to the narrative in *Mrs. Dalloway*, luckily without erasing too many details, thereby allowing the presence of abundant spatiotemporal symbols. Intriguingly, the sensitive and fickle feelings of both Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith ensure the recurring thematic symbols in the forms of varied senses, mainly regarding the visual spatiotemporal symbols and auditory spatiotemporal symbols. In light of the exposition by Derrida, iterability opens a non-

saturable context onto a recontextualization. Iterability of the trace (unicity, identification, and alteration in repetition) is the condition of historicity^[7]. Simply put, repetition with sincere and organic differences will crystallize, supplement, or reconstruct a text, guaranteeing the ongoing afterlife of writing. Suffice it to say that nuanced or obvious differences in the rendering of one same symbol in the novel will help to emphasize and then disseminate the palimpsest thematic connotations. In such a way, amid the stream of consciousness, the readers are seemingly prone to distractions, but still able to negotiate gaps and differences.

2.1. Visual Spatiotemporal Symbols

Visual spatiotemporal symbols abound in *Mrs. Dalloway*, with the frequently presented and thematically relevant ones being the window, the wedding ring, and the flower. A window not only separates the interior world and the exterior world, but also enables one to deconstruct the boundary by looking through the frame of it. In the novel, Septimus Smith decides to jump out of a window at that very moment when he walks to the window and sees an old man standing still on the staircase of the opposite building, gazing at him^[8]. Later in the party, when Mrs. Dalloway hears the story of Septimus, she withdraws from the noisy banquet and stays in her bedroom, wondering that she is somehow so similar to him. Then, through the window, she is surprised to find an old woman standing on the same floor in the opposite building and also staring at her^[8]! This almost transcendental similarity between the two characters will only serve to reveal the subsequent different endings of the two. Septimus Smith chooses death, which reminds Clarissa Dalloway of the value of life. In this case, the window is tantamount to a mirror, symbolizing the gaze of others as well as the other voice inside one's self.

Another typical symbol is the wedding ring. Treading on eggshells every day, Rezia still fails in her attempt to communicate with her mentally ill husband, Septimus Smith, but insists on taking care of him. One scene where Rezia laments that she has become so thin, to the extent that her wedding ring slips off, has been mentioned twice in the novel. One may wonder whether her constant care for her husband, a shell-shocked First World War veteran, is out of love or just the aftermath of the war, namely, the heavy responsibility that the families of the wounded veterans should assume. At the beginning of the novel, the iterability of this symbol, the wedding ring, goes a long way towards the recontextualization. When Clarissa Dalloway strolls through the streets of London and struggles to adapt to the hustle and bustle of post-war urban life, she is in a trance and pictures London as a grass-grown path, and all those hurrying along the pavement on this Wednesday morning are merely bones mixed with a few wedding rings in the dust and the gold stoppings of countless decayed teeth^[8]. Thus, the individuals' marriage is dwarfed by the cruelty of history.

Virginia Woolf refers to various types of flowers and plants, such as the classic opening of the novel that Mrs. Dalloway says she will buy the flowers herself. A stunning majority of characters are repeatedly described in floral terms. For instance, in the scene where Mrs. Dalloway feels uneasy when she doesn't receive an invitation from Mrs. Bruton for her party, she appears as a plant on the riverbed that feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers^[8]. Clarissa is humanly inconsistent: at once cold and self-absorbed and yet warm, quick and full of sympathy^[9]. Given the circumstances, having difficulty in defining the boundary between the interior space and exterior space, Clarissa is undecided whether to distance herself from the others or to be part of the society. The ambivalent portrayal of her is complete here.

2.2. Auditory Spatiotemporal Symbols

The easily distracted Clarissa and the mentally ill Septimus are most likely to be susceptible to exterior noises, which surely casts light on the fact that auditory spatiotemporal symbols persist

throughout the novel.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Big Ben strikes regularly, representing a symbol of the irrevocable time and the specific space of London. The chimes of Big Ben have been carefully and constantly recorded in the novel, inviting characters to notice the traces of time in regular intervals in a slew of crucial scenes. Even right after Septimus flings himself vigorously out of the window, the clock strikes the irrevocable hour, one, two, three, with a determined rhythm.

The voice of the hinge of a door being taken off should be easily defined as the symbol of an open door to guests. But in the very first page of the novel, in the morning, Lucy takes off the hinges and opens the door. The little squeak of the hinges has immediately made Clarissa revisit days of the past in Bourton in her mind^[8], ensuring both time montage and space montage. Back then, she was eighteen and the enigmatic and demanding Peter Walsh was still her lover. As an implicit pun and a subtle supplement, the gesture of taking off the hinge also echoes the word “unhinged”, implying the protagonists’ struggle against insanity.

Similar to Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith also enjoys strolling along the streets of London. In one scene, when people hear an explosion, like a pistol shot, Woolf creates suspense and slowly unravels the mystery. It turns out that it is due to the backfire of a motor car. But for the shell-shocked Septimus Smith, the sound of explosion and the delay of confirmation undoubtedly take him back to the days of the war. He imagines that the world has raised its whip, and where will it descend^[8]? Similarly, in the street, with a rumbling noise, the skywriting by a plane is not immediately legible, which will easily remind one of the combat aircraft during the war, but ends up being an advertisement for toffee. Such auditory symbols apparently denote time and space and reveal the internal plots.

2.3. Flowing Spatiotemporal Symbols

Flowing spatiotemporal symbols should be defined as another creative symbol sincerely and sometimes implicitly crafted by Virginia Woolf, concerning the form of water and its numerous derivatives, such as lake, fountain, wave, and ripple. It’s well established that the water, the river or the ocean is shapeless and unpredictable, possessing the power to devour everything, nurture aquatic plants or hide treasures. And the recurrent symbols of water reinforce the impression that everything is running together, that consciousness and city are becoming indistinguishable^[10]. In addition, it’s worth noting that the philosophical symbol of water is rendered in both the text and the form in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

For example, the Serpentine Lake, the large body of water in Hyde Park, has occurred, first amid Clarissa’s morning walk when she remembers having once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, and then in the news of Septimus’ suicide when Clarissa murmurs that “she has once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more, but he has flung it away”^[8]. To begin with, her gesture of throwing a shilling into the Serpentine is paralleled by her own gesture of throwing bread to the ducks in childhood, with the first epitomizing the inclination of discarding treasure and the latter the attempt of nurturing life. Therefore, her gesture of throwing a shilling comes subtly as a rehearsal for Septimus’ ending of his life.

The symbol of water has also emerged differently as a fountain, echoing Clarissa’s rejection of Peter Walsh. They stood with the fountain between them, the spout (it is broken) dribbling water incessantly^[8]. The malfunction of the fountain and the reluctance of the dribbling water declare the end of intimacy between the two, so here the image of water harks back to the melancholy past. Similarly, with the vessel of water, the memory of her attachment to Sally has been reflected amid one flashback that Sally went out, picked hollyhocks, dahlias ... cut their heads off, and made them swim on the top of water in bowls^[8], which is reminiscent of the innocence and romanticism of Sally. Now, the once feisty Sally has become more conventional and given birth to five sons.

Importantly, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, with the absence of real water, the different traces of metaphorical water have also shaped the form of language, and consequently the openness of the text. The flow of symbolic water in the novel inspiringly resembles the stream of consciousness, signalling that memory and time appear to be equally shapeless and unpredictable, washing over and pushing forward each lonely or lost individual. For example, when recalling her romantic past with Peter in Bourton, Clarissa senses the flap of a wave, the kiss of a wave, and the fresh, calm air. Or when Woolf creates suspense to slowly guess whom is in a passing luxurious motor car in Bond Street, she phrases it as: The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors' shops on both sides of Bond Street^[8]. As such, the influences of hierarchy, monarchy, and war keep penetrating the life of London. What's more, Septimus Smith is always in a trance or has hallucinations throughout the novel, while frequently seeing himself as a romantic buccaneer or a drowned sailor, navigating the sea of life and death.

3. Dissemination of Binary Themes

Derrida's "dissemination" is a way of writing that can never operate exclusively at the level of the signifier. The work of dissemination undoes the order of things, disrupting the security of borders and regulations and unsettling the solace of ideal forms^[6]. On this very note, the previously mentioned exquisite narrative mechanism and the repetitive yet differentiated symbols across *Mrs. Dalloway* have ensured the chain of signifiers, the interplay of signifiers, subsequently disseminating the connotations of varied pairs of binary themes, ranging from past and present, sanity and insanity, being and nothingness, to life and death.

First of all, the consciousness of characters in the novel is not bound by a strict sense of determinism. Typically, the ambivalent characterization of Clarissa Dalloway is consistent throughout the novel. On the one hand, she keeps everything ship-shape and Bristol fashion while throwing endless huge parties. On the other hand, she seems to be all thumbs when striving to juggle her different selves in life. Specifically, when she feels very young, but at the same time unspeakably aged, and when she slices like a knife through everything, yet at the same time is outside, looking on^[8], the past and the present paradoxically coexist in her innermost being, along with her attempt of distancing and her desire for belonging.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, thematic structure is supported by multiple pairs of binary opposition. When the parallel stories of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith connect, with Clarissa hearing of the death of Septimus, the geography structure is deconstructed, and so does the thematic structure. Hence, the dissemination of the philosophical and universal binary themes is possible. Given this, the previously mentioned window through which Septimus flings himself epitomizes a mirror, deconstructing the binary structure of life and death. Different from Septimus, Clarissa is still able to strive to keep insanity at bay, earning herself the chance to see the contrast of life and death face-to-face and eventually reach an afterlife, surviving with her original enthusiasm for life, her constant doubt about being and nothingness, her anger at the public's forgetting of the war, and her sincere sympathy for those marginal individuals. So the end of the novel comes as: It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was^[8]. It's the identity of Clarissa herself, not Mrs. Dalloway, that has been eventually seen and confirmed by none other than Peter Walsh. Meanwhile, Clarissa's previous inability to juxtapose the past and the present has also been deconstructed, ensuring the portrayal of how an ambivalent soul attempts to come to terms with the world and embrace whatever the future has in store for her.

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