

# PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF TIME IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S Mrs. DALLOWAY

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## ABSTRACT

Psychological time is a subjective and personal aspect of time which is used as a writing technique by modern artists like Virginia Woolf. *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf is considered as one of literature's masterpiece works, brimming with the concept of time and its various aspects. This paper examines the psychological aspect of time experimented by Virginia Woolf in her novel *Mrs Dalloway*. This paper also aims to study psychological time as interdependence on the individual mind, on personal experience and the subconscious of the self that is constructed by Woolf in the characters of her novel.

Not remaining untouched by the contemporary spirit of experimentation with the concept of time, Woolf employs the literary technique of stream of consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway* to capture her characters' total flow of consciousness- their thoughts and memories. To accomplish this technique she manipulates and experiments with the concept of time in her story: she speeds up, slows down or stretches time according to the duration of human experience. According to Bergson's concept, time can be basically divided into two aspects, namely chronological time or the clock time and psychological time or time on the mind. Woolf has not only represented these two distinct aspects of time in her work *Mrs Dalloway* but also has intersected the clock-time and the mind-time to provide a beautiful flow to the narrative. Apart from that, the interaction between psychological time and clock time in the novel also brings in a to-and-fro motion of time in the story. The treatment of time by Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* also provides a way to understand the perception of time by Modern literature and philosophy which forms the backbone of this study.

## INTRODUCTION

### *Time and Literature:*

Time is a fundamental unit in literature as much as it is in our lives. Time in literature has existed since the very beginning of literature itself. All forms of literature deal with time in some or the other way including real-time progressions, flashbacks, revealing of characters and new events.

Authors all over the world use various aspects of time like narrator time, author time, plot time and reader time while creating their pieces of work. However the works produced by some modern writers like Virginia Woolf are influenced by new concepts of time that contrast with the aforementioned aspects of time, which are rather

complicated and deep, called the Psychological Time [1]. In the works of such writers, the past often influences the present, and psychological time comes into existence due to the coexistence of past, present and future in the mind of the characters. Psychological time is brought into context by using stream of consciousness techniques and by combining the notion of flow along with unveiling the interest in the deeper layers of the human consciousness. Woolf uses free indirect speech in her writings that contain the characters' private thoughts and thus incorporating and giving the reader access to the consciousness and psychology of the character [2].

### **The Concept of Psychological Time:**

One can be sitting idle doing nothing and feel like hours have passed by, whereas it is just minutes in reality. But while doing something recreational, what seems like minutes are hours that have passed by. How does time have such distinct aspects? And what is each of these aspects known as? The duration of emotions and experience is registered by a subconscious time system present in humans. It does not depend on the time shown by the clock nor does it rely on compartmentalization of time into minutes and hours. The time that is assumed by our psychology is based on subjective and personal norms which vary from person to person. But the time represented by a clock is rather objective, public and constant.

Arguably, there are two different types of time, one that the clock tells and the other that the human mind assumes. These two types of time have distinct characteristics, which clearly separate them from one another. Clock time is fragmented into Minutes, seconds, hours and years which are interconnected in their relationships. These fragments together govern the progress of life and the events in a chronological and linear manner depending upon when they happen in time. This time is what history is made of, and is what the present and future are constituted of.

The other type of time is governed and regulated based upon the experiences in day to day life that are stored in the temporal lobe of the human mind. It is flexible and is constantly in flux which can be compressed or expanded. When a period is compressed within the mind, the actual time seems to pass very rapidly. Contradictorily, when time in the mind is extended, the actual time of an event is much shorter than that is experienced personally. The time on mind is what is referred to as psychological time. It will be interesting to discover what influence of psychological time has had on contemporary literature and how it is represented by selected authors like Virginia Woolf from those periods.

**DISCUSSION:**

**Interpretation of Psychological time by Woolf:** Time is a recurring theme in Virginia Woolf's pieces of works. She contrasts psychological time and clock time. *Mrs Dalloway* narrates the single day of a woman character. This indicates that the narrative does not focus on the sequential occurrence of events. It focuses on the consciousness and psychological aspects of the characters [3]. The novel does not have a chapter indication rather it is presented as one large chapter. However it is divided into units like the Big Ben strikes, The Hours which demonstrates that clock time divides the narrative into pieces which indicates that there is a continuous flow of psychological time. The novel also engages several stylistic features that suggest a preoccupation of time.

The incorporation of a renewable expansion of the inevitable process of clock time along with the temporal aspects of time can be seen in the novel, *Mrs Dalloway*. In addition to this is also anticipation of an externalisation of the subconscious which is multi directional in perspectives. However Woolf presents time as a conflicting image which uses solid, materialistic and objective manifestation of time against the temporal, internal and subjective nature of psychological time. The novel is a unification of both the temporal continuum by Woolf's technical and stylistic skills.

**Rooted Repetition:**

Apart from using time as a connecting device in her narrative, Woolf also uses repetition to connect and strengthen her characters. She not only connects and creates characters using this technique, but also uses it to defy clock time.

Repetition is used wisely as a tool by Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* to make the novel more coherent. It is used both for connecting the characters directly and also for redirecting the readers to the initial occurrence of the repeated idea or phrase. This not only breaks the linearity of a conventional novel but it also does not allow it to progress in a chronological manner from event to event. The novel and its idea refer back to itself and makes the narrative circular with much stronger internal coherence [4].

Woolf repeatedly uses a phrase- ' Fear no more the heat o the sun' which is a phrase taking from a sonnet from *Cymbeline*, by Shakespeare, which is spoken at the grave of one the characters from the play.

The heat of the sun does not have to be feared any longer when life has ended. Death and transience are also important themes in Woolf's novel. Death forms the inevitable end. Death is the moment when the clock time has run out.

The Shakespeare phrase is repeated or referred to by several different characters. Woolf's use of repetition is subtle. She does not use it very often.

**Big Ben as an image:**

The standard system of temporal measurement is defined by Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*. She presents a rather idiosyncratic demonstration of her views about human temporality. She lays down a distinct dislocation of the mechanistic clock from the temporal and organic clock [5].

In the narrative the presence of Big Ben dictates the cosmopolitan time of the global spaces of the entire world. Time itself becomes polarized. Woolf encapsulates this particular concept as she presents the sequential chiming of Big Bens ticking clock as a scaffold that constructs the linear chronology of the narrative while remaining as an external object outside the internal reality of the main characters. The sustained and unrelenting presence of the clock rules and dominates the figuring of the instantaneous and perpetual moment. It acts as a transitional phenomena guiding characters through past, present and future experiences.

Not only repetition enhances the sense of connectedness that is vital to Woolf's novel but also the characters are unified through the images that are used to evoke their states of mind. These images pull the story together, but they are also the largest source of disruption within the novel. One of the most important images in *Mrs Dalloway* is the Big Ben, and not surprisingly it has several different functions within the novel. The first function is that it compartmentalises or fragments the novel into temporal units. The Big Ben also functions as a unifying element, and thirdly it creates a reality in relation to which the characters; inner experiences must be placed.

The striking of the Big Ben in the novel represents clock time. The discrepancy between the clock time and the psychological time exists in the mind, but is also created in relation to the clock time. *Mrs Dalloway* has numerous examples that depict how the experiences of psychological time last longer than the actual experience in clock time [6]. The discrepancy between the inner and the outer registration of time exists in reality and is illustrated by temporal disjunctions in the novel. The chiming of the Big Ben and the other clocks forms a sort of penetration into the thoughts and lives of the characters, reminding them of the reality. It also presents a difference between the actual time that has elapsed and the time on the character's mind, hence bringing in the idea of psychological time into play.

**The Stream of Consciousness:**

Stream of consciousness is a term that covers a broad spectrum of techniques used by different writers like Woolf, Joyce and Proust to demonstrate the personal thoughts and the psychology of their characters. Woolf uses this technique to create a liquidity that smoothly flows from one character to the other in her narrative without the reader actually being aware of it. She unites all her characters in this stream or ocean of consciousness and presents it in a multiplicity of several characters.

"The theory that time is a flux and not a sum of discrete units is linked with the theory that human consciousness is a stream and not a conglomeration of separate faculties or ideas". [7]

According to this theory, an instable, relentless and liquid property of time is established which produces an adhesive and cohesive representation of the actuality. The technique of the 'Stream of Consciousness' that Woolf uses demonstrates the cohesion of sensory images and transitions within the mind and the momentary experiences of the human mind as they gradually materialize in the narrative. Mrs Dalloway is a cage of psychological aspects of memories, feelings, perceptions, imaginations, visuals and sensations of the characters' minds. Frequent transitions between speech and thought are deliberately introduced in the narrative to create an unfixed flexibility and fluctuation of the actual experience experienced by the subject.

The stream of consciousness technique explores the dynamic embryonic and inchoate stages of private reflection. "The view that consciousness itself occurs in short pulses, each of which is experienced as a whole, from which it is but a short step to the view that a stream of consciousness consists of a succession of such pulses, each a short lived total experience." [8]

### **Woolf's Tunneling Process:**

The technique of tunnelling implemented into the novel by Virginia Woolf makes it possible for the representation of the multiplicity of the human mind. Along with it, the coexistence of past and present, and psychological time and clock time is also enabled. Mrs Dalloway is a novel that turns away from the traditional linearity of a narrative. The caves behind the characters surface in unexpected places in the narrative which are almost suddenly. The concept behind such suddenness of occurrence of the storyline is that events get surfaced only when they are relevant and such surfacing takes places through recollection of thoughts by the characters. The flow of the narrative continues as soon as the character stops thinking.

The characters in *Mrs Dalloway* are almost involuntarily triggered into remembering events from the past by stimuli they receive in the present. The characters are connected through similar and shared experiences which in turn connect their tunnels. Apart from memories and shared experiences that are used to connect the tunnels or to surface them briefly, Woolf uses several other elements to do the job. These unifying elements play a major role in the narrative because they are used to connect people without the characters ever meeting or sharing conversations directly.

### **CONCLUSION**

Woolf uses a lot of techniques to create contrast between the planes of psychological time with the reality of clock time. The technique of stream of consciousness is used to switch between characters, and for connecting them on a level of psychological time.

She also applies her tunnelling technique for the first time when she wrote *Mrs Dalloway*. Such tunnels enable Virginia to make the coexistence of past and present a possibility in her novel in an almost parallel realm. The

tunnels are used to create connections between the characters and as demonstrated in the way of retrospections and recollections by the characters. Further, repetition adds to the cohesion of the relationship of the characters along with the incidences. The contrast between psychological time and clock time is brought about by the usage of various techniques which encompasses the life of the several characters in the novel. Woolf said that 'fiction is like a spider's web'. The image of a spider's web is complex but is a coherent and forms the underlying pattern in her novels.

She explores the history of her characters by tunnelling caves. This also illustrates the coexistence of past and present. Apart from creating a contrast between psychological time and clock time, and between past and present Woolf tries to form connections between characters and the storyline to form a more coherent structure.

These points are represented simultaneously by several characters that share similar experiences at the same time. Woolf organises events in such a way that they form switches to switch from one character to the other. All her characters are connected in a web in a definite pattern. The pattern creates a basis for the exploration of an alternative plane of psychological time.

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