

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO VIRGINIA WOOLF'S



MRS DALLOWAY

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ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by John Sutherland and Susanna Hislop*

*The  
Connell Guide  
to  
Virginia Woolf's*

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# Mrs Dalloway

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*by  
John Sutherland and Susanna Hislop*

# Contents

## NOTES

Introduction	4	<i>The origins of Mrs Dalloway</i>	8
A summary of the plot	7	<i>The Bloomsbury group</i>	14
What is <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> about?	11	<i>The sky-writing plane</i>	18
What is distinctive about the narrative voice?	21	<i>Madness</i>	20
What view of personality emerges from <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> ?	36	<i>A room of her own</i>	26
Why does Clarissa suffer from a sense of loss?	45	<i>Stream of consciousness</i>	28
Why is Clarissa's relationship with Sally Seton so important?	52	<i>Big Ben</i>	31
How are Clarissa and Septimus linked in the novel?	65	<i>The cinema</i>	32
What does <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> tell us about British society?	78	<i>Mrs Dalloway's London stroll</i>	38
How does the novel connect doctors with British imperialism?	91	<i>Woolf on Proust</i>	41
How can the individual escape authority in <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> ?	102	<i>The menopause</i>	46
How disturbing is <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> ?	110	<i>The Woolfs and children</i>	49
		<i>Woolf and Vita Sackville-West</i>	55
		<i>Woolf's female friendships</i>	56
		<i>Septimus's heroism</i>	69
		<i>Shell shock</i>	70
		<i>Ten facts about Mrs Dalloway</i>	75
		<i>Names</i>	80
		<i>The Canadian crisis</i>	93
		<i>Empson's complaint</i>	97
		<i>Parties</i>	112
		<i>Politics in June 1923</i>	118
		<i>Critics on Woolf</i>	121

# Introduction

It is hard to find anyone nowadays who will dare venture a bad word on *Mrs Dalloway*: its status as major literature, a pioneer feminist text and a brilliantly experimental work, is wholly secure. Woolf is, with Jane Austen, the leading woman novelist in English Literature, and this novel is one of the peaks of her literary achievement. In short, *Mrs Dalloway* is a “classic”.

At the time of its publication, however, opinions were more mixed than ours. It was hard in the mid-1920s to come to terms with what, for many, seemed a vexatiously new-fangled work. The reading public was not yet ready for the challenge of what came to be called “stream of consciousness” narrative, or the inner richness of a novel whose main event, a superficial reading might suggest, is an upper-class Conservative politician’s wife’s purchase of flowers for a summer party. This, recall, in the immediate aftermath of a conflict, the First World War, which had shaken the whole of Europe to its foundations.

It was without doubt an intellectual and well-ordered novel, granted P.C. Kennedy in his contemporary review – but “there are no people”. By which he meant characters a reader like himself could easily identify with. Virginia Woolf’s arch-rival, Arnold Bennett, about whom she would write scathingly (and amusingly), snorted angrily

that he couldn’t finish the damn thing because there was no logical “construction”. Where was Woolf’s story going? Was there a story? For Bennett, *Mrs Dalloway* was a novel without “plot”: for Kennedy it was a novel without “characters” – those two basic ingredients of the realist novel from whose conventions Woolf’s work of fiction so willfully and skillfully departs.

Even Woolf’s friend, and fellow Bloomsbury Group stalwart, E. M. Forster, expressed private doubts about her ability to create “rounded”, or fully living, characters of the kind he so relished and created in novels like *Howards End*. But he did praise the visual qualities of *Mrs Dalloway*: “How beautifully she sees!”, as he put it. It is not the highest of literary praise. In the Cambridge critic F.R. Leavis’s conservative literary journal, *Scrutiny* (founded in 1932), blue-stocking Muriel Bradbrook attacked *Mrs Dalloway* head on, pointing contemptuously at its “astonishingly ingenuous” heroine who was “preserved in a kind of intellectual vacuum”. No plot, no character, no serious ideas. The “Scrutineers” waged ceaseless war against the “Bloomsberries”, who they (wrongly) thought to be effete dilettantes. For the disciples of Leavis the great novelist, the epitome of the “Great Tradition” in English fiction, was D. H. Lawrence – a novelist of very pronounced ideas indeed who, it was felt in Cambridge, got to grips with life. Lawrence himself had little time for

Virginia Woolf. Reading novels like *Mrs Dalloway*, he said, was like being shaken up in a feather mattress until you felt like a feather yourself. Neatly put – but grossly unfair.

Woolf was, Lawrence might well have said, “narrow-gutted” – the offensive term he applied to Jane Austen. And upper-class with it. Woolf wrote a famous polemic, *A Room of One’s Own*, demanding domestic space and independence for women like herself to be fully creative. But Woolf always had servants to clean her domestic space (and turn her mattresses) in the fine houses she was brought up in and lived in all her life.

Her life was certainly materially comfortable but anything but comfortable temperamentally. Before, during, and after writing *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf teetered on the edge of mental breakdown, and more than once fell into its awful depths. She could as readily have identified with Charlotte Brontë’s madwoman in the attic as sensible little Jane Eyre. On the edge of the main plot of *Mrs Dalloway*, and its heroine’s outwardly serene existence, Woolf places Septimus Smith – a shell-shocked survivor of the Great War who finds peacetime too terrible to continue living in.

These topics and many others, covered in the pages that follow, need to be taken on board, assessed, and given their proper weight. *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel which, in a sense, one must learn – from its pages themselves – how profitably

to appreciate. It is also a novel which provokes thought about the fraught nature of genius, literary modernism, the ambiguous place of women in English society and literature, the infinite complexities of sexual relationships, and even the worthwhileness of life itself. The last was a burning issue for Virginia Woolf. It is one of the inestimable losses to English literature that she decided, in April 1941, that life was, after all, not worth living and killed herself, aged 59 (Mrs Dalloway is 52). Was it a rational act, or an act of madness? Biography is divided on the subject.

The reader must start from the position that *Mrs Dalloway* is an unusually complex work of literature. The aim of what follows is to outline and, as best one can, define that complexity and to suggest ways in which, with reading and re-reading, one can win through it for one of the most rewarding experiences English fiction has to offer.

## A summary of the plot

It is not an easy novel to read, but *Mrs Dalloway* is the easiest of novels to summarise. “A day in the life of a middle-aged upper class woman planning her party” is how the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature* encapsulates it. The day is 13th June, 1923 by the best guess we can make. The “upper class woman” is Clarissa

Dalloway, the wife of a middle-ranking Conservative politician who has never quite made it into the Cabinet.

She is recovering from a serious illness and depression, for which she has been treated by eminent Harley Street physicians and therapists.

The long prelude to the party is Clarissa's



### THE ORIGINS OF MRS DALLOWAY

Richard and Clarissa Dalloway first appeared in Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). In their first incarnation, as Elaine Showalter notes, they are slightly comic figures. Clarissa is "a tall slight woman, her body wrapped in furs, her face in veils", with artistic tastes but no brains to speak of. Richard is a Tory MP with conventional opinions on everything. He vows at one point that he will be in his grave before a

woman is ever allowed to vote in England.

Then, in August 1922, Woolf wrote the short story "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street", believing it might serve as the first chapter of a novel. She quickly began to wonder about a sequel. "Shall I write the next chapter of Mrs D. – if she is to have a next chapter; & shall it be The Prime Minister?"

In this first phase, the novel made much of the contrast between Clarissa, the society hostess, and the Prime Minister, who drives through London and will come to her party. In this version, says Showalter, Clarissa "buying gloves in Bond Street, is the epitome of the leisured lady of the ruling-class for whom the Empire exists. The Prime Minister is the target for all

morning walk through the West End of London to collect the flowers for the party she and her husband are throwing that evening. When she returns from buying the blooms she finds she has a visitor – Peter Walsh. Thirty years earlier they had been on the brink of marriage, in an affair which reached its emotional climax at a country

the feelings of resentment and hopelessness felt by the excluded and deprived man in the street."

Gradually, during late 1922 and early 1923, Woolf's ideas evolved. Septimus became a character then, in May 1923, she came up with the idea of an old suitor for Clarissa: Peter Walsh. "There shd. now be a long talk between Mrs D. & some old buck." Struggling with the problem of making her characters more than two-dimensional and getting the element of time into the book through the characters' memories, she hit on the solution at the end of August:

My discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth.

Throughout the novel's composition, Woolf was trying out new approaches and possibilities. How should she pull it all together with images and allusions? Art helped, says Showalter. "Cubist paintings, strange as they looked to the uninitiated eye, had a unity on the canvas that came from the use of colour, and from the boundary of the frame.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the striking of Big Ben acts as a temporal grid to organise the narrative." Indeed Woolf's working title during most of the writing of the novel was "The Hours", and the continual chiming of clocks keeps us aware of "the passage of time and the measuring out of human lives and seasons" <sup>n</sup>

house, Bourton.

Clarissa declined Peter's proposal and they went their separate ways. He migrated to India, and missed the war. There is a woman in India, Daisy, with whom he may, or may not, have a relationship. His conversation with Clarissa is unsatisfactory and he goes off, disconsolately, to ruminate in Regent's Park, fiddling all the while with the penknife in his pocket. He has, he may feel, fiddled his life away.

The park is also where a World War One veteran, Septimus Smith, is walking with his Italian wife, Lucrezia, a hat maker. Septimus is still suffering from shellshock, and is seriously deranged. The birds, he fantasises, are talking to him – in ancient Greek. (This actually happened to Woolf in one of her breakdowns.) Before the war he was a sensitive, promising poet. During the conflict he had an intense relationship with his officer in the trenches, Evans, who was killed. It haunts him.

Septimus is about to go for a consultation with Clarissa's Harley Street psychiatrist, Sir William Bradshaw. No help is forthcoming. Sir William's advice is platitudinous and useless. Septimus must be moved to an asylum.

The narrative focus shifts to Richard, Clarissa's husband, at lunch with two friends, Hugh Whitbread and Lady Bruton; they talk of grand affairs of state. Richard returns home with a bunch

of roses for Clarissa. He senses their relationship has, obscurely, gone wrong. He is right.

The focus moves again to Septimus and Lucrezia at home, waiting for removal to the asylum. In terror, he throws himself out of a window, impaling himself, fatally, on the spiked iron railings below. As the ambulance bell rings Peter, who hears it, goes to Clarissa's party.

Also present at the party is Sally Seton, with whom Clarissa fell in love many years earlier, during her days at Bourton. Once a tomboy, Sally is now dull Lady Rosseter. News of Septimus's death arrives and is gossiped about. Clarissa feels a bond with the dead man – stronger, perhaps, than that for her husband or her near-adult daughter, Elizabeth (on the brink of conversion to evangelical Christianity). The novel ends, inconclusively, after the party.

## What is *Mrs Dalloway* about?

Virginia Woolf, like her predecessors Jane Austen and George Eliot, "chose on the whole to describe women less gifted, intellectually less audacious, more conventional than herself". Margaret Drabble's shrewd remark certainly applies to the society lady at the centre of Woolf's fourth novel.