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Mrs. Dalloway

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Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway

By Gary Carey, M.A.

University of Colorado

IN THIS BOOK

- Life and Background
- List of Characters
- Critical Commentary
- Character Analyses
- Review Questions
- Bibliography
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Mrs. Dalloway Notes

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Sir Leslie Stephen was fifty years old when his second daughter, Virginia, was born January 25, 1882. He had been married before, to a daughter of Thackeray, and after her death had remarried a widow with three children. He reared that family and now was in the midst of rearing one of his own. Sir Leslie was a renown literary critic, and was also a cantankerous old man, not always a pleasant father to live with. Years after her father was dead, Virginia, over fifty herself, wrote in her journal that had her father lived she would never have produced either her novels or the many volumes of essays. Her father's dominance would have prevented all creativity.

Virginia inherited her father's passion for books, and, from her mother, she inherited beauty. Virginia and her sister Vanessa were strikingly good-looking girls, their beauty being classic Greek rather than "pretty." When they were children, Henry James thought that they were unusually attractive creatures but, after they were grown, he revised his estimate. The girls were still attractive, physically, but James was shocked by their most unladylike behavior. Both girls radiated a certain demure shyness but underneath they were, like their father, out-spoken and satirical.

The Stephen children (Thoby, Vanessa, Virginia, and Adrian) were a closely-knit group and though Virginia was frail, stayed at home, and educated herself with her father's library, she was never left out of a gathering or an outing. Leonard Woolf, who married Virginia, recalls that Virginia and Vanessa were invariably together. He also recalls that when they came up to Cambridge to visit their brother, Thoby, he fell in love with Virginia immediately; many years later George Bernard Shaw wrote Virginia that she had had the same effect on him.

From the first, Virginia Stephen was unusual. Besides having James Russell Lowell as godfather, and besides being self-educated, in her mid-teens she filled a number of copybooks with original compositions, imitating first one literary style, then another. Later, after both her father and mother were dead, Virginia moved out of the family home in Hyde Park. Eventually she took a lease on a large four-storied house in Brunswick Square and rented the top floor to Leonard Woolf; she occupied the third floor; her brother Adrian lived on the second; and Maynard Keynes and Duncan Grant occupied the bottom apartment. In 1911 this arrangement was very daring for most young women but to Virginia it seemed the pleasant and practical thing to do.

Leonard Woolf had been in the Civil Service for seven years and was happy to re-acquaint himself with his old friends, the Stephens. Not surprisingly, while he was living in the apartment above his "landlady," during his leave of absence, he fell in love with Virginia all over again. He tried to prolong his leave so that he might return to Ceylon if Virginia refused his proposal of marriage but the Service demanded an answer, so Leonard decided to resign and gamble on Virginia's saying "Yes" to him. He courted her with long walks, tickets to the theater and to the ballet, but Virginia was reluctant to give him an answer. When she did agree to marry him, they made a special day of it. They took a train out from London, then hired a boat, and rowed up the river. A little over a month later, they were married.

The Woolfs spent a long and leisurely honeymoon traveling through France, Spain, and Italy, and when they returned to London they moved into Clifford's Inn, Fleet Street. It was a sooty section of London but the rooms were fine and both Virginia and Leonard felt very free in this neighborhood that had known Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pepys, Johnson, Boswell, and Tennyson. During the day Virginia worked on *The Voyage Out* and Leonard wrote *The Village in the Jungle*. In the evenings, they would cross Fleet Street and dine at the Cock Tavern.

During 1913, when Virginia was finishing *The Voyage Out*, Leonard noticed that his wife was becoming irritable and

nervous. She had worked on perhaps a dozen drafts of her first novel and now that it was almost done, she was developing excruciating headaches and was unable to sleep. Leonard was not unaware that Virginia had a history of mental instability before he married her. During her childhood, Virginia suffered a breakdown, and after her mother's death in 1895 she suffered another breakdown. Now the old symptoms were recurring. For a few weeks, Virginia agreed to rest in a nursing home, but after she returned home, the delusions and sleeplessness returned, and although Leonard tried to get his wife to rest in Holford, a quiet little village where Coleridge and Wordsworth once lived, Virginia's condition remained unstable. The Woolfs returned to London, and a few days later, Virginia attempted suicide. She swallowed an overdose of veronal tablets. Four trained nurses were required during her recovery and, had it not been for Leonard, Virginia would probably have been committed. The doctors who treated Virginia during these periods of semi- and acute insanity were either ready to place her in a hospital or they were (like the doctors in *Mrs. Dalloway*) only able to suggest that she be given plenty of rest and good food. In 1913 very little was known about mental illness; nearly all cases were diagnosed as various stages of neurasthenia.

Virginia's breakdown lasted almost two years with only short periods of respite but Leonard stayed with her constantly. Meals, he remembers, would often take an hour, sometimes two. Occasionally Virginia could be induced to feed herself but often Leonard had to spoonfeed her. At times Virginia was violent, even with the nurses; at other times, she was depressed and suicidal; once she lapsed into a coma for two days.

In 1915, *The Voyage Out*, which had been held up from publication for two years, appeared. It received fairly good reviews and Virginia was cited as being an important new novelist. Immediately she began *Night and Day*. In 1917, Virginia began to return to a normal social life and it was during this time that she met Katherine Mansfield and Middleton Murry. It was also during this period that Leonard and Virginia founded the Hogarth Press. Many myths surround the Press, supposing it to

have been the toy of eccentric moneyed dilettantes. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Woolfs had been living off Virginia's investments and had very little money. Leonard bought the hand press in order to occupy Virginia's mind with something manual. During 1917 and 1918, there was not a single month that she did not have reviews in *The Times Literary Supplement* and, of course, she was working on her second novel. Leonard was fearful of another breakdown. But this creative tempo was typical of Virginia's output all during her life. She always tried to keep a flow of creative writing pouring during the mornings, then, during the afternoons and in odd hours, she would write critical essays as relief and as a different sort of mental discipline.

The Hogarth Press was begun in the Woolf's dining room, with the press on the table and Virginia and Leonard teaching themselves to print by the instructions in a 16-page manual. Their first publication was *Two Stories*—one by Virginia, "The Mark on the Wall," and one by Leonard, "Three Jews." The book was entirely hand-printed, hand-bound, and sold 134 copies. Ten years later, the Press was recognized as an important publishing house and their publications' schedule was so full that the printing had to be jobbed out. During this time, the Woolfs published *Kew Gardens* by Virginia and *Poems* by T. S. Eliot (including "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service"); later the Press published another of Eliot's poems, *The Waste Land*.

The Woolfs and Eliot were close friends and it was he who suggested that, since no other English publisher would touch it, the Hogarth Press publish a large, bulky manuscript by James Joyce. Virginia and Leonard agreed to consider the manuscript, and Eliot had a friend deliver a portion of *Ulysses*. Virginia read it and thought it was raw and not particularly well-written but she did recognize a strata of genius in it, so she and Leonard promised to publish it, provided they could find someone willing to set it up in print. That was in 1918; in 1919, they had to return the manuscript. All the printers they contacted were wary of the voluminous anomaly.

The Woolfs lived in Hogarth House from 1915 to 1924. The Press was begun and became famous during the time WWI ran its course and ended. *Night and Day* appeared and received praise, but less than *The Voyage Out*; both books were financially unprofitable. In April 1920, Virginia began *Jacob's Room*, her first masterpiece. The novel concerns Jacob Flanders, a man remembered first through one person's memory, then another's. The viewpoint changes continually. It was Virginia's first successful attempt since *Kew Gardens* to fashion a multi-dimensional reality and to concoct a plot that abolished pat formulas for writing fiction. She was revealing many faces of reality when her contemporaries were insisting on a one-viewpoint, unified approach.

Jacob's Room was not an easy book to write because Virginia had no models; she was creating a new medium of narration. In addition, she was again suffering terrible headaches and insomnia and was required to spend much time in bed. She was diagnosed for lung trouble, then for heart trouble. Again the doctors suggested (as they do for Septimus Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway*) that all she needed was rest and relaxation. When she was able, however, Virginia continued to write, using a large piece of plywood with an inkstand glued to it, filling self-bound notebooks with her almost indecipherable, sharp script.

Jacob's Room was published in October, 1922, and received fiercely partisan reviews; either the reviewers thought that the novel was a poetic, electric masterpiece or else they were shocked. Virginia Woolf, the latter clique said, had defied the form of the novel: she had gone too far! They bemoaned the end of English literature. But Virginia was already working into *Mrs. Dalloway* (first called *The Hours*) and although she was upset by the bad reviews, she continued to unfold yet another impressionistically told story. Looking through her diary, one notices her excitement of being able to battle words and form and being able to do so without also having to battle mental fatigue and illness. At this time, Virginia was using the hours not spent with *Mrs. Dalloway* to write and assemble *The Common Reader*, a collection of essays about English literature. And, while writing

on these two projects during 1923 and 1924, she was already planning her next novel, one to be written about her father and mother, *To the Lighthouse*.

Mrs. Dalloway, *The Common Reader*, and *To the Lighthouse* were all recognized as revolutionary, solid productions. The fiction was an attempt to reveal the mystery and magic of personality beneath the skin of human beings, yet it was not until after *Orlando* was published in 1928 that Virginia began to receive real monetary reward from her writings. She was 47 years old and had written for nearly 27 years. Also, it was not until *Orlando* that her work became popular with the public. The critics recognized Virginia Woolf's importance, discriminating people bought and read her novels, libraries acquired them, but the public found them difficult. *Orlando* was a breakthrough, an extravagant novel tracing the reincarnation of its main character—as various men and women—throughout the ages of English history and literature.

Following *Orlando's* success was *The Waves* (1931), a complex prose poem taking place almost entirely within the minds of its characters with a counterpoint evocation of waves and the sea; *Flush* (1933), a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog; and *The Years* (1937), a major best seller, both in England and America, Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, was published posthumously. She had finished a first draft but she was unsatisfied. No doubt she would have continued to cut and revise and polish had she lived; with all her novels she was a merciless perfectionist. But she felt her old sickness returning. During most of 1940, insomnia and nervousness grated at her, and one day in March, 1941, she wrote a note to Leonard: she felt that she was going mad and did not have the courage to battle the voices and delusions again. She acknowledged Leonard's goodness and his continuous, kind care. While she was writing the note, Leonard passed her worktable and reminded her that it was nearing lunchtime. A little later, he called to her but there was no answer. He went to look for her and found her hat and her walking stick on the river bank. She had drowned herself.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Clarissa Dalloway

A delicate lady of fifty; the wife of Richard Dalloway.

Richard Dalloway

Quiet, gentle; holds a government post.

Peter Walsh

A former suitor of Clarissa; he is planning to marry the wife of a major in the Indian Army.

Elizabeth Dalloway

Seventeen years old; the daughter of Clarissa and Richard Dalloway.

Lucy

Maid in the Dalloway house.

Scrope Purvis

Neighbor of the Dalloways.

Hugh Whitbread

Old acquaintance of Richard and Clarissa; has a minor position at Court.

Evelyn Whitbread

Sickly wife of Hugh Whitbread.

Sally Seton

Clarissa's first close friend; now married to Lord Rosseter, and the mother of five boys.

Doris Kilman

Tutor to Elizabeth Dalloway.

Septimus Warren Smith

An ex-soldier who is shell-shocked and insane.

Lucrezia Warren Smith

Young Italian wife of Septimus.

Justin Parry

Clarissa's father.

Helena Parry

Clarissa's aunt.

Isabel Pole

Septimus' first love.

Evans

Sturdy, red-haired comrade of Septimus; killed in Italy shortly before the Armistice.

Daisy

Twenty-four years old; plans to marry Peter Walsh; has two children.

Sir William Bradshaw

A self-made man; physician to Septimus.

Dr. Holmes

A doctor whom Septimus and Lucrezia consult.

Lady Millicent Bruton

Friend of the Dalloways.

Milly Brush

Lady Bruton's secretary.

Miss Pym

Clerk in Mulberry's flower shop.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

OUT FOR FLOWERS*

Mrs. Dalloway is not a novel that chronicles the years of the life of Clarissa Dalloway. In fact, *Mrs. Dalloway* is not a conventionally narrated novel at all. It is a collage, a mosaic portrait; it pieces together bits of Mrs. Dalloway's past and bits of Mrs. Dalloway's present on a single day—a Wednesday in mid-June, 1923. As far as plot is concerned, Mrs. Dalloway on this particular day in June prepares for and gives a party. That is all that happens. Our job is to look beyond the plot and realize who Mrs. Dalloway has been and what she has become. We must try to see

*The novel, of course, has no chapter divisions, but for the sake of discussion and easy reference, appropriate titles have been given to the various scenes.

the diversity beneath the surface of this English lady and try to get a sense of her personality. This is not an easy task because appearances deceive.

When Mrs. Dalloway was a young girl, her beau, Peter Walsh, prophesied that someday Clarissa would be The Perfect Hostess. Peter said this impulsively, out of jealous anger, yet when we finish *Mrs. Dalloway* we are left with a literal image of Clarissa Dalloway as The Perfect Hostess. Peter Walsh's chance and angry remark seems to have been most accurate. Clarissa's destiny does indeed seem to have been that of a well-bred wife who would give successful parties for her husband. This would seem to be the only value of her life.

In a sense, Clarissa Dalloway does develop into a perfect hostess; and, in a sense, *Mrs. Dalloway* is about a party Clarissa gives. But these ideas are only on the surface. A woman is never just a wife, or a mother, or a hostess; human beings cannot be defined in one word. It is only when we are ignorant, or lazy, or angry (as Peter Walsh was) that we label one another. But we make these generalized, easy assessments of people every day while knowing that we — individually — are certainly too complex to be summed up so easily. We would never dream of simplifying ourselves so narrowly because we know how very little of our "real selves" is displayed to the world. There are depths of feeling — hatred, despair, joy, sensitivity — which are rarely revealed. And, in the same way that much of our emotions remain submerged, our minds also pile up ideas, dreams, conversations, and multitudes of words and thoughts that are never uttered. The acts we actually perform are only pale outlines of another multi-thought and -feeling individual. It is this individual which is Virginia Woolf's concern in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Who is Mrs. Dalloway?

Probably it is best to start with what Clarissa Dalloway looks like so that we have a frame for our discoveries about her. And in determining Mrs. Dalloway's physical features we should note how we learn such details; Virginia Woolf's art of narration is just as important as the content of her novels.

We learn that Mrs. Dalloway prefers to buy the flowers herself. This seems like an innocuous statement, yet this single sentence is the entire first paragraph; it is a curious way of beginning a novel. What lies behind the first sentence is this: Virginia Woolf is getting Mrs. Dalloway out of the house so that she can be seen by strangers, by an old friend, and by a neighbor. Also, Mrs. Dalloway can react to a London she has not seen for some time. We are going to learn about Mrs. Dalloway from various points of view; we will not be told outright the facts about Mrs. Dalloway because such collections of facts reveal too little. We must learn by observation.

Mrs. Dalloway's excursion is not routine. Usually Mrs. Dalloway has things done for her; she is not used to doing errands. Today, however, seems special to her because it is fresh and brisk. The fact that the maid is busy supervising the removal of the winter doors is an excellent opportunity for Mrs. Dalloway to go out shopping. This is a day when Mrs. Dalloway is going to do something she enjoys but which, because of illness, she has not been able to do for some time: to go strolling on an errand through London's noisy, bustling traffic. The return of the summer season, the return of Mrs. Dalloway's health, and her return to a busy London scene parallel one another.

As Clarissa heads for the flower shop, we leave her thoughts and enter the mind of Scrope Purvis. Purvis has been Clarissa's neighbor for many years so his observation is valuable. He thinks of Mrs. Dalloway as bird-like—perched, as it were, on the curb. She seems bird-like despite being fiftyish and still bearing the pallor of her recent illness. She is wearing a feathered yellow hat (we learn this after she returns home) and possibly this spot of plumage influences Scrope's comparison. But, no, Clarissa also thinks of herself as bird-like—too bird-like, she would say. We learn this when she reflects on Lady Bexborough.

By comparing herself with Lady Bexborough, Clarissa (not Virginia Woolf) tells us about herself. We learn about Clarissa's physical appearance and we learn her thoughts as she compares herself with a woman whom she considers ideal. Clarissa would,

for instance, gladly exchange her own pale and smooth complexion for Lady Bexborough's dark and crumpled one. She would like to have a face with more visible character. She would like to move more slowly and stately, not lightly; she feels that she is too flighty, too pointy-featured, and too insincere. Clarissa, it would seem, would like to be less feminine; more masculine, perhaps. At least she would like to have a more serious mien and be interested in, say, politics. She does not find her pallor or smooth skin attractive—or even natural. She talks of her body as being a “nothing” that she “wears.” The only features that she approves of are her hands and feet. Otherwise, she is *not* happy with her outward appearance—the thin, white, bony sack that contains Mrs. Dalloway.

Perhaps these seem like unusual, contradictory thoughts—this despair at aging, and at aging unattractively, while Clarissa is very obviously enjoying being in the hurry and noise of the London morning. Without a doubt, Clarissa is thrilled to be in this colorful London stream; our first view of her is filled with her excited responses to being a part of the city's thoroughfare again. Her moods do alternate however; in one paragraph she is troubled and worried, in the next she is sparkling. Yet Virginia Woolf did not insert these changes of mood merely to be whimsical or lyrical.

Consider this: Clarissa's flashes of worry about aging are not at all unnatural; she has already said that she wishes she were not so delicate and brooding. Also, Clarissa has been ill, has become even more delicate, and has had too much time to think. No doubt her doctor and husband and friends commented on her looks and Clarissa would probably have consulted, first of all, her mirror as she searched for signs of illness in her over-fiftyish face. In addition, one must remember in assessing Mrs. Dalloway's fluctuations of moods that if Clarissa was confined to bed during her illness she would, like most people past fifty and confined to bed, have reflected on life. She would have recalled and pondered. Recovered now, and back in the stream of London traffic, her sick-bed seriousness would not have been immediately flushed away. There would be this natural residue of seriousness in the midst of all the wonder of this morning.