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# A Study Of The Theme Of Modernism in Virginia Woolf's Novel Mrs. Dalloway

## Modernism in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway (1925)

Modernism is the period spanning the commencement of the 20th century to about 1949 (after WWII). Prime traits of modernism include emphases on the stream of consciousness technique, individualism, alienation, unorthodoxy and pessimism. Modernism marks a break with traditions such as Western Christianity and cultural uniformity. Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was an English author who blazed the trail for feminist and modernist expression. Her classic novel, Mrs. Dalloway, is an exemplary novel characterized by modernist ideals such as caustic pessimism, skepticism, resignation and an overbearing melancholy. Woolf stands with 20th century Modernist greats such as her contemporary, T.S. Eliot who also mastered the art of literary stream of consciousness. In Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, one finds the signature traits of modernism: stream of consciousness, alienation, individuality, unconventionality and pessimism.

Virginia Woolf in Mrs. Dalloway explores with the stream of consciousness technique in which the flow of language is as incoherent and discursive as human thoughts. There are flashbacks and fast-forwards in time and sometimes the train of ideas never continues. The language of the mind is very critical because during the modernist period, the freedom of the mind and the focus of the lack of structure mirroring the failures of institution. In Mrs. Dalloway, at times the sentences are very long. The confusion of the narrative enhances modernist perception of the disintegration of society and a world in a state of chaos, shaped only by the individual interpretation. As a highly psychological narrative, Mrs. Dalloway is populated by characters undergoing intense mental suffering and struggles between extremes such as Septimus Warren Smith, who experiences shell-shock or post-traumatic stress disorder owing to his WWI service. As a lunatic, he rambles on as he meticulously observes nature one day where "upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst in flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames" (Woolf 2003, p. 18). Here Woolf takes the reader into the inner consciousness of Septimus, revealing the topics on which the mind dwells and to which it erratically transitions. Woolf continually exploits this stream of consciousness method with the protagonist, Mrs. Dalloway and other characters, laying bare their thought patterns and molding the novel to suit.

Alienation comes into play in Mrs. Dalloway since one sees the wide disconnect among characters. Septimus's insanity detaches him from society as he internalizes and in the process estranges himself. Septimus is degraded to an outcast from society who cannot function anymore within it. The theme of alienation rears its head again in Mrs. Dalloway's own life. She has become estranged from her husband and she continues to pretend before the eyes of her social circle. Her feelings of disconnectedness persist especially at the evening dinner she hosts for her friends and acquaintances. In some moments she experiences keen anguish at her loneliness and she figures that no one is able to understand her except Sally Seton. On the other hand, Sally Seton and Mrs. Dalloway are childhood friends now distant because of time and place. They are not familiar anymore with one another being apart for several years.

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Another case of alienation portrayed in Mrs. Dalloway is the old woman in the window across from Mrs. Dalloway's house. The elderly woman lives alone, never has no visitors and remains enclosed in her home. Mrs. Dalloway observes that the aged woman is cut off from society, yet admires that society is not allowed to intrude her space. Lucrezia, Septimus' wife feels desolate and alienated since she has to support her shell-shocked husband. In the relationship, "she was very lonely, she was very unhappy! She cried for the first time since they were married" (Woolf 2003, p. 101). Reduced to a child, Lucrezia feels cut off and despairs. Each character in Mrs. Dalloway is acquainted with a specific space because personal experience and/or preference. Sometimes, some characters opt for self-confinement such as the Old Lady at the Window. Contrariwise, one sees Septimus who vehemently rejects containment. Meaningful connections are sparse in Mrs. Dalloway with characters seeking equilibrium between communion/connection and isolation.

Modernism is a school of thought that champions individuality as a desired value. One sees different perspectives and different worlds co-existing as the book celebrates idiosyncrasy, acting as forum to many individual personalities and voices (Bullivant 2009, 10). In Mrs. Dalloway, each world is formed by the background, views, choices, experience and individuality of each person. As one progresses through the text, their worlds change dimensions for circumstances never remain constant. Woolf however expresses a depth of understanding of life's occurrences in Mrs. Dalloway, while exploring individual musings and reactions. Woolf quotes that "for this is the truth of our soul ... our self, who fishlike inhabits the deep seas" (Woolf 2003, p. 179). Here, Woolf parallels individuality to a truth contained only in one's person. This stance also demonstrates the current thought of relativism which characterizes modernism. Truth is not absolute instead it varies from individual to individual. Woolf uses isolation and the personal quirks of characters as a means of emphasizing individualism. Elie Henderson the loner, the lonely woman living opposite Mrs. Dalloway, the indefatigable Sally Seton who metamorphoses into Lady Rosseter, the eccentric Ms. Kilman who opposes Mrs. Dalloway's belief system. They all assert their personhoods, showing that they stand alone as unique and inimitable.

Pessimism is another characteristic of modernism in which characters either espouse gloomy views or the texts conclude adversely. Woolf infuses pessimism in her storyline by inserting the account of Septimus' suicide. Suicide is an event in which the victim sees no escape from life's obstacles and occurs as a direct result of depression, loneliness, aging, and failing health (Ron 2004, p. 18). The conglomerate of these elements is further compounded by a society which neglects and even marginalizes the lunatic as useless, expendable, and 'dead weight.' Rather than be institutionalized in a mental asylum, Septimus chooses death. Woolf captures Peter Walsh as he pessimistically ponders life, comparing it to a fish's "threading her way between the boles of giant weeds, over sun-flickered spaces and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable." (Woolf 2003, p. 179). Mrs. Dalloway thinks often of death surviving the deaths of both parents and sister. At the end of the novel, no change takes place in the characters as they remain unfulfilled in their desires.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf dares to explore unorthodoxy in her discourse on homosexuality as seen between Mrs. Dalloway and Sally Seton. In English society, homosexuality is not accepted. Woolf through Sally Seton are revolutionary in their views of sexual orientation. Lesbianism is not only rejected but its members are marginalized and ostracized. In the social space, the women would be outcast. As a result they are forced to abide by society's status quo. However even at the party, they take the time to mention their affection for one another.

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Since same-sex relationships are unconventional, both women are resigned to being married heterosexually.

In sum, Woolf's model modernism as evidenced in Mrs. Dalloway makes her stand out as a modernist novelist. Mrs. Dalloway has given definition to concepts of Modernism, shedding light on the cherished ideals of the literary movement and period. Alienation, individualism, pessimism, anti-institutionalism and unorthodoxy go against the mainstream and come about as a consequence of exploitation and war. These principles are all subjective to the modernist mind and lapse into a relative property, rather than a fundamental precept. Woolf's modernism is exemplary in that it contains its main principles, and even embodying these principles in her characters. She achieves a worthy place in literature as not only a pioneer but a champion of modernism.

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