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Conference Article



Memory and Modernity: Exploring Urban Disillusionment and the Search for Meaning in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Beyond


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Abstract

Modernist literature has left an indelible mark by delving into the profound impact of existential anxiety and disorientation that emerges when individuals find themselves ensnared in a web of disillusionment with no clear escape route. This exploration starkly delineates that alienation has been a consistent facet of human experience since the inception of modern capitalist ideas, particularly influencing minds and hearts in urban landscapes. Consequently, the examination of disillusionment remains pertinent in our contemporary society, where urban marginality, memory, and institutional influences continue to intricately shape our lives in complex and opaque ways. Against this backdrop, the present study, with the help of select text, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) written by Virginia Woolf, is an attempt to bring the alienation theme that offers the author's sights not just on a kind of "transformation" amplifying humans' separation from the

world but also on the dilemmas and trials of the Modern Age. On the one hand, mirroring the fractured state of society and memories, where individuals are isolated and unable to communicate effectively symbolizes emotional emptiness, where characters or societies experience a lack of connection, meaning, or fulfilment. In other words, the present study can serve as a metaphor for the erosion of moral values, cultural decay, and the breakdown of social structures. On the other hand, it strives to provide women with the proper clues through their constant struggles and tireless resistance to have meaning in their lives.

Keywords: Alienation, Disillusionment, Marginality, Memory, Urban, Resistance, Cultural decay

Introduction

The poet John Donne's ageless pronouncement, "No man is an island," reverberates profoundly in the discourse of urban planning and development. In the intricate tapestry of city life, individuals find themselves surrounded by bustling crowds yet often grappling with profound solitude. While humans are inherently social beings, this fundamental truth appears strangely absent as a central consideration in the modern urban fabric. One might intuitively expect that the dense proximity to countless individuals would naturally cultivate a deep sense of belonging and community. However, amidst the relentless pace of city living, past emotions and personal connections can easily fade into distant memories. The vibrancy of bustling streets, soaring skyscrapers, and incessant motion may create an illusion of connectivity, yet the reality frequently undermines this expectation. As Henry David Thoreau astutely observes, "City life is millions of people being lonesome together." In the guise of progress and modernity, the urban landscape often amplifies the paradox of simultaneous proximity and isolation. Similarly, Woolf portrays London as a city of both vibrant sensory experiences and profound alienation, where Clarissa Dalloway's reflections on her past and present accentuate a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the superficiality of social rituals. The apparent display of vigorous activity and infrastructure, as well as the deeper fabric of human connection and community, is obscured and diminished. Modernity's rationalized and impersonal milieu exacerbates this sense of disillusionment, as the relentless pace and structure of city life add to a feeling of existential void. Through Clarissa's contemplative exploration, Woolf delves into how the pursuit of meaning is entangled in the conflict between the immediacy of urban experiences and the yearning for a more unified, transcendent grasp of self and existence.

Theoretical Framework

To analyze Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) through the lens of urban disillusionment and the search for meaning, my methodology adopted Georg Simmel's essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life", Benjamin's concepts of the 'flâneur' to the concerned study to gain a deeper understanding of the urban bleakness and isolation experienced by the characters. Georg Simmel's analysis of the urban experience will provide insights into the effects of city life on individual psychology and social interactions. The flâneur, a detached and observant wanderer, offers a unique perspective on modern lives emphasising themes of alienation and disconnection. Applying this concept to "Mrs. Dalloway" helps to illuminate the characters'

experiences in post-World War I London. The flâneur's wandering underscores modern cities' fragmented and chaotic nature, where people coexist yet remain isolated.

Main Body

A growing and notable body of literature such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), exemplified by Virginia Woolf emphasizes often bleak portrayals of modern urban life, highlighting its superficiality, pretensions, and persistent sense of monotony and misery. London, as depicted in "Mrs. Dalloway," is a sprawling, impersonal metropolis where the grandeur of the cityscape contrasts sharply with the inner lives of its inhabitants. The city's vastness and bustling nature contribute to a sense of anonymity and detachment. Characters move through the city's streets, encountering crowds and structures that seem indifferent to their struggles. This sense of impersonal interaction contributes to the urban bleakness experienced by the characters, reflecting the alienation and isolation they feel. Moreover, the stark contrast between the public and private spheres underscores the urban bleakness in the novel. While the public realm of London is defined by social engagements, lively parties, and bustling thoroughfares, the private realities of the characters expose a more sombre and reflective inner world. The social events and rituals, such as Clarissa's party, are depicted as elaborate but ultimately hollow. The meticulous planning and execution of these events contrast with the deeper emotional emptiness felt by the characters. The social façade serves as a mask for the underlying disillusionment and sense of futility.

The sheer number of people and the constant exposure to different lifestyles and perspectives can amplify the pressure to fit in. Urban residents often encounter a wide array of social groups and expectations, which can create a sense of fragmentation and the need to align with various social norms to gain acceptance. Additionally, the anonymity of urban life can lead to a heightened desire for recognition and validation, as individuals seek to establish their identity and social standing within a large and often impersonal community. Also, as Georg Simmel argues, the metropolis fundamentally alters individual psychology, necessitating adaptations and adjustments to cope with the intense stimuli of urban life. Such analysis of the psychological differences between rural and urban life can be effectively applied to Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" to deepen our understanding of the novel's portrayal of its characters and the city of London. Clarissa's morning walk through London showcases her interactions with the bustling city. She perceives a multitude of sights, sounds, and people. Her thoughts are a stream of consciousness, jumping from one observation to another, indicating her mental adaptation to the rapid flow of urban stimuli. Her appreciation of the beauty of the city, coupled with fleeting moments of existential reflection, exemplifies the heightened sensory awareness and psychological adjustment to the metropolitan environment.

Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" is a profound exploration of 20th-century modernity, characterized by its ambiguity and complexity. Instead of following her desires to be "this or that" Clarissa remains in her "role" to accommodate the expectations of others, recognizing that it is a "perfect idiocy" (Woolf 8). She wonders what is "beneath what people said (and these judgments, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!) in her mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life" (Woolf 100). She even manages all of her social events for her husband Richard, "or for her idea of him" (Woolf 63), and not for herself. To support her position in the society she

even adjusts her posture and gestures. In the words of Clarissa, life is simply people “making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (Woolf 4).

Alongside, within the vast sea of faces, Woolf’s modernist techniques and rich symbolism create a deeply layered narrative that invites advanced critical analysis and reflection on the human condition. Woolf perfectly diverges from traditional storytelling norms by embracing a fragmented narrative structure that mirrors the intricate workings of memory and the complexities of modern life. This approach challenges linear coherence, offering a more authentic portrayal of how thoughts and experiences unfold. In “Mrs. Dalloway,” an ex-soldier, Septimus Smith’s struggles with shell shock are deeply intertwined with themes of modernity, highlighting the disorienting effects of rapid societal changes post-World War I and it also traces his efforts to deal with and make sense of his postwar existence. Woolf’s innovative stream-of-consciousness technique effectively captures the fragmented nature of Septimus’s thoughts, mirroring the disarray and instability characteristic of the modern age. At his first appearance, Septimus’s mental instability is evident as he walks with his wife, Rezia. His mind erratically shifts from noticing “boys on bicycles” to a paranoid belief that the world “threatened to burst into flames” (Woolf 15). His angry response to Rezia’s attempt to ground him in the present underscores his deep sense of alienation and his inability to connect with the everyday world (Woolf 15). Riley Floyd, in the article “I Must Tell the Whole World,” elucidates Woolf’s intent in using Septimus as a conduit to communicate the profound psychological impacts of war. Septimus’ sole method of way processing his thoughts he thinks about is by drawing “diagrams” and “designs,” as well as writing “odes to Time” and “messages from the dead” (Woolf 147-48). It lets him to communicate in a way society deems unacceptable. War made him an “eternal sufferer”, “a scapegoat”, bound to “eternal loneliness” (Woolf 19):

He was deserted. The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes. But why should he kill himself for their sakes? Food was pleasant; the sun hot; and his this killing oneself, how does one set about it, with a table knife, uglily, with floods of blood – by sucking a gaspipe? He was too weak; he could scarcely raise his hand. Besides, now that he was quite alone, condemned, deserted, as those who are about to die are alone, there was a luxury in it, an isolation full of sublimity; a freedom which the attached can never know. (68-9)

Septimus’s trauma impairs his capacity to process his wartime actions, blurring the lines between legality in war and civilian life. Floyd notes that Septimus understands “killing is illegal,” yet he was compelled to kill during the war, a paradox that exacerbates his mental anguish (Floyd 1474). Floyd argues that this confusion stems from Septimus’s “inability to feel” the full extent of his trauma, a psychological defense mechanism that only heightens his sense of dislocation (Floyd 1482). For Septimus Warren Smith, the cityscape represents alienation and disconnection. His experiences in the park, surrounded by people yet isolated by his traumatic memories and mental illness, highlight the alienating effects of the urban environment. The impersonal and overwhelming nature of the city contrasts with his inner turmoil, emphasizing his sense of being out of place in post-war London. “It might be possible, Septimus thought, looking at England from the train window, as they left Newhaven; it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning” (133). This reflects the broader societal anxieties of the time, as the aftermath of the war brought about a collective questioning of reality and truth. Moreover, Woolf

not only addresses the personal ramifications of war but also critiques the inadequacies of contemporary society in dealing with the psychological aftermath. Septimus's journey is a poignant exploration of the fractured self in the modern world, highlighting the urgent need for a more compassionate and nuanced approach to mental health in an era marked by profound change and uncertainty. Through his character, Woolf poignantly illustrates the enduring impact of modernity on the human psyche, emphasizing the intricate interplay between individual suffering and broader societal transformations.

The realization that an individual is no longer with their true self contributes to their existential angst and the feeling that their life lacks authenticity. Much like Septimus Smith, Clarissa navigates her journey immersed in thoughts, self-reflection, regrets, nostalgia, and a life marked by emotional distance. Clarissa feels nearly stripped of her identity, absorbed into the crowd, without any expectations for the future: 'there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond street, this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs Richard Dalloway' (Woolf 13). Despite her yearning for liberation, she finds herself ensnared in her relationships, often donning a facade of sophisticated smiles. As a survivor of male dominance and the radically transformed post-war landscape, Clarissa is incessantly torn between the existential polarities of life and death. Clarissa's deeper emotional virginity or innocence that remains intact despite her physical experiences of childbirth and marriage suggests an untouched core of her being that remains unfulfilled and detached: "So the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading, for she slept badly, she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet" (46). Virginia Woolf deftly conveys Clarissa Dalloway's existential anxiety and profound sense of isolation underscores her deep-seated vulnerability and peril. Woolf's exploration of Clarissa's feeling of invisibility—"she had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown" (Woolf 8)—delves beyond physical appearance into an existential crisis, where Clarissa perceives herself as overlooked and undervalued within society. This perception of invisibility implies a disconnection from the external world, rendering her a mere observer in her own life. The transformation from "Clarissa" to "Mrs. Dalloway" symbolizes a significant shift in identity, where societal expectations subsume her personal identity under her marital role, further amplifying her isolation and existential disconnection.

Woolf poignantly captures the intricate emotional landscape of marriage in the modern urban setting. "For in marriage a little license, a little independence there must be between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him", says Clarissa (10). "she felt like a nun" within her marriage further emphasizes the emotional state a sense of isolation, asceticism, and perhaps a lack of personal fulfillment of Mrs. Dalloway. This metaphor—"felt like nun"—serves as a powerful commentary on emotional restraint and suppression that can occur within modern urban societies, where individuals may feel confined by societal expectations and the demands of city life. Woolf's portrayal invites readers to contemplate the delicate balance between independence and intimacy, and the enduring quest for personal fulfillment within the bonds of marriage.

The recognition of emotional or psychological distance within marriage relationships such an intimate bond reflects the complexities and challenges that can arise in personal

connections. Throughout "Mrs Dalloway," Clarissa's reflections on marriage, there is an acknowledgement of a "gulf" between husband and wife suggests a level of disillusionment in Clarissa's understanding of marital relationships. However, at the same time, Clarissa's contemplation of dignity and solitude hints at a deeper search for meaning within herself and her relationships.

And there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect, thought Clarissa, watching him open the door; for one would not part with it oneself, or take it, against his will, from one's husband, without losing one's independence, one's self-respect — something, after all, priceless. (181)

The solitude she mentions may indicate a quest for understanding the individual self, and the recognition of a gulf suggests a search for meaning in the intricacies of human connections. The description of maintaining one's independence and self-respect as "priceless" suggests that Clarissa views these qualities as essential components in the search for meaning and fulfillment. Clarissa's self-awareness, her ability to "know people almost by instinct," and her observations of the surroundings underscore her perceptive nature. This aligns with Woolf's exploration of the inner lives and thoughts of her characters.

In a world grappling with the loss of meaning, love, and intimacy, Virginia Woolf's exploration of these themes in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) resonates deeply. Woolf's novel delves into the complexities of human relationships and the existential challenges individuals face in finding connection and purpose. Interestingly, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) gives profound importance to the love between women through the deeply emotional and intellectual bond between Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton. Clarissa contemplates her past relationship with Sally Seton, recognizing it as a form of love, different from her relationships with men but equally significant: "But this question of love (she thought, putting her coat away), this falling in love with women. Take Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton. Had not that, after all, been love?" (48). The character replicates on the passing years and how her share of life seems to be gradually diminishing. Clarissa distinguishes it from romantic or sexual love, which often involves desire and self-interest:

The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one's feeling for a man. It was completely disinterested, and besides, it had a quality which could only exist between women, between women just grown up. It was protective, on her side; sprang from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe) (Woolf 50)

First, this reflection implies a deep engagement with memory, a recognition of the vibrant and expansive experiences of youth. The use of words like "stretching" and the vivid imagery of absorbing the colors, salts, and tones of existence suggest a longing for the richness of past experiences. The character is grappling with the changes that time brings, and memories play a crucial role in this contemplation. Second, by contrasting this relationship with Clarissa's conventional marriage and her interactions with men, Woolf challenges societal norms and underscores the transformative potential of same-sex love. Through this nuanced portrayal, Woolf highlights the unique significance of female friendships and their impact on personal

identity and fulfilment, offering a subtle critique of the limited roles available to women within heteronormative frameworks.

In Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa's walks through London can be seen as a manifestation of this *flâneur* identity. Like the *flâneur*, Clarissa moves through the city with a heightened awareness of her surroundings, yet she often feels disconnected from the life she observes. This duality—being connected to the city yet simultaneously isolated—mirrors Benjamin's idea of the *flâneur* as someone who experiences modern urban life from a place of detachment, observing the world with a critical eye.

Woolf's depiction of London as more than just a backdrop but as a living, breathing entity aligns with Benjamin's conceptualization of the city as a space where the *flâneur* navigates and contemplates the complexities of modern life. London, in this sense, is a character that reflects Clarissa's internal state. The city's vastness, its constant flux, and the anonymity it offers its inhabitants parallel Clarissa's own feelings of fragmentation and isolation. As she observes the "taxi cabs" and feels herself "out, far out to sea and alone," Woolf captures the *flâneur*'s experience of modernity—being simultaneously immersed in the city's flow while feeling profoundly detached from it.

While walking through London Woolf reflects on the loneliness of Clarissa's life: "she had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to see and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (Woolf 8). Even as she moves through life, she often feels like an observer, separate from the world around her. Her awareness of the inherent danger in living ("it was very, very dangerous to live even one day") underscores the fragility and unpredictability of life. Clarissa's sense of existential ennui and her contemplation of the "dangerousness of living" further deepen this connection to Benjamin's *flâneur*. The *flâneur* is often a figure who grapples with the alienation and meaninglessness of modern life, and Clarissa's internal musings resonate with these themes. Her walks through London are not just physical journeys but also metaphorical explorations of her own consciousness and the precariousness of existence. The recurring imagery of being "out" suggests her sense of being removed, not only from the physical world around her but also from a deeper, more existential connection to life. In addition, Benjamin's *flâneur*, characterized by nostalgia and loss, finds an echo in Clarissa's ruminations on her past and the decisions that define her life. Her trauma and isolation are exacerbated by the city's unending activity, which sharply contrasts with her own still, introspective nature. This disconnection between the self and the external world, coupled with the awareness of life's fragility, underscores the existential themes that Woolf weaves into Clarissa's character.

In sum, Clarissa Dalloway embodies the *flâneur* paradoxical existence: engaged with the city yet detached from it, part of the social fabric yet profoundly isolated. Through this figure, Woolf explores the multifaceted nature of modern existence, where the desire for meaning is frequently accompanied by a profound sense of alienation and existential anxiety. The city of London, with its vastness and ever-changing nature, serves as both a mirror and a backdrop to Clarissa's inner turmoil, highlighting the intricate interplay between the self and the world in Woolf's narrative.

In cities, the traditional, mystical elements of life often become overshadowed by the demands of modernity. Urban environments are characterized by their focus on efficiency,

productivity, and practicality, leading to a sense of disenchantment. The bustling cityscape, with its emphasis on speed and functionality, can strip away the spiritual or magical aspects that were more prevalent in pre-modern, rural settings. Urban disillusionment in relationships may stem from the potential fragmentation of personal identities within the fast-paced urban lifestyle. The constant demands of city living may lead individuals to prioritize practicalities over emotional expression. In the process, personal identities may become compartmentalized, contributing to a sense of disillusionment where authentic emotional connections become challenging to establish and maintain. Beyond the societal and digital realms, the feeling of being unseen or unheard can have existential dimensions. In the hustle and bustle of modern life, genuine human connection can be overlooked. The isolation experienced in crowded urban spaces or the anonymity felt in the faceless masses can contribute to a deep-seated sense of being invisible, lost in the sea of humanity. Existential philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus explored the idea of existential isolation, emphasizing the struggle of the individual to find meaning and recognition in a seemingly indifferent world.

Despite the inherent challenges of urban life, individuals like Clarissa in the concerned text consistently seek out communities and social networks to cultivate a sense of belonging and support. To contribute something of value to the world, "Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another" (259). Clarissa believes that she must bring people together and that she can avoid suffering by providing a space for community. The purpose and sense of throwing a party in life could be best described as follows:

and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. Anyhow, it was her gift. Nothing else had she of the slightest importance. (185)

This presents a dilemma: on one hand, it underscores the world's indifference and the absence of ultimate meaning in life. Humans strive for a sense of significance, seeking it through art, social gatherings, pleasure, and other pursuits. This discord between the inherent human longing for meaning and the perceived inadequacy in fulfilling those needs engenders what Camus refers to as the feeling of the absurd. On the other hand, while our very existence may seem irrational and absurd, as we continue living, we persistently discover meaning. In her effort to create a sense of belonging, Clarissa gathers a group of people who share her aristocratic outlook on England, which in turn sustains and reinforces her escape from reality. In a larger context, the party serves as a microcosm of society, illustrating the importance of social gatherings in creating bonds and fostering a sense of belonging amidst the anonymity of urban life. The party reflects the existing social structures and hierarchies, showcasing the different roles and statuses within the urban community. It brings to light the complexities and tensions inherent in these social dynamics. The sense of community engagement on the part of Clarissa offers vital pathways for meaningful involvement and collective purpose.

The language Woolf invokes to describe Clarrisa's party as an "offering", in the words of Nicole Kresich, suggests "something open to the public, yet intimately privatized with a guest list." This depiction, contextualized within the socio-political landscape of the early 20th century, captures the complexities of a post-war society's lived experiences and attitudes, "yet inspires a new

appreciation and perspective towards human belonging” (*Surviving Isolation: A Commentary on Clarissa’s Parties in Mrs. Dalloway*).

The lead sentence of the concerned text—“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself”— epitomises the modernist literary tradition, where symbols are imbued with multifaceted and ambiguous significations. Flowers, in this case, can be seen as elusive signifiers that embody a complex interplay of beauty, fragility, and ephemerality. Their symbolism extends beyond mere aesthetic pleasure, functioning as dynamic metaphors that resonate with the intricate emotions and uncertainties characterizing the post-war era. In the aftermath of World War I, the world was confronted with the physical and emotional wreckage of war, prompting a yearning for moments of beauty and solace. Flowers, with their ephemeral bloom, become poignant symbols of fleeting beauty juxtaposed against the harsh realities of a post-war landscape. Also, it becomes a nuanced response to the complexities of post-war disillusionment, trauma, and societal transformations, encapsulating a quest for beauty and meaning amid the uncertainties of the modern world.

The existential angst, magnified by the convolutions of contemporary living characterized by rapid urbanization, and changing social dynamics, can lead to a sense of dislocation and fragmentation. The pace and pressures of contemporary life might overwhelm individuals, causing them to focus on the immediate present and future at the expense of memories. As we contemplate the future of urban development, it is crucial to integrate a comprehensive understanding of human social needs and aspirations. Literature, like Woolf’s work, often explores this balance, highlighting the importance of memory in maintaining a sense of personal and cultural identity amidst the relentless forward march of time. Clarissa engages in introspection, contemplating the intricacies of her youth, the decisions that have defined her, and the divergent paths left unexplored. The following passage delves into Clarissa’s nostalgia, with vivid sensory details that bring her memories to life:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen . . . (3)

The exploration of memory provides a link to the past, shaping her present emotions, while isolation underscores the existential challenges and perilous nature of human existence. The introspective nature of stream-of-consciousness can inspire readers to engage in self-reflection. As characters grapple with existential questions, readers might be prompted to consider similar questions about their own lives, leading to a deeper search for personal meaning.

Conclusion

Mrs Dalloway (1925) serves as a critique of the dehumanizing aspects of modern urban life, where the drudgery and monotony of routine, coupled with the impersonal forces of mechanization, contribute to a sense of fragmentation and disillusionment among its characters. Woolf’s novel invites readers to contemplate the complexities of urban existence and its impact on individual identity and fulfilment. The loneliness experienced amid the frenzy of city life is a multifaceted issue rooted in urban environments’ very structure and nature. It reflects modern

cities' fragmentation, superficiality, anonymity, and individualism. This loneliness is a profound sense of disconnection, a symptom of the broader societal changes and challenges inherent in urban living. Addressing this issue requires critically examining how cities are designed, how social interactions are facilitated, and how community and belonging can be fostered in an increasingly fragmented world.

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