

***Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)**

Author: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)

Plot summary (Peter Boxall, *Encyclopedia Britannica*)¹

Short

The novel, which examines one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class Londoner married to a member of Parliament, is essentially plotless; what action there is takes place mainly in the characters' consciousness. The novel addresses the nature of time in personal experience through two interwoven stories, that of Mrs. Dalloway, preparing for a party, and that of the mentally damaged war veteran Septimus Warren Smith.

While never abandoning her omniscient third-person voice, Woolf enters the consciousness of seemingly unconnected characters and brings their feelings to the surface. The characters are connected, and the narrative shifts from one to another, by means of shared public experiences.

Analysis (abridged from Peter Boxall, *Encyclopedia Britannica*)

The novel takes place over the course of a single day, in London. It traces the interlocking movements around Regent's Park of the two main protagonists: Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. The passage of time in the novel, punctuated by the periodic striking of Big Ben, ultimately takes us to a double climax; to the success of Mrs. Dalloway's illustrious party, and to the suicide of the shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith, who finds himself unable to live in the post-war city.

Much of the effect of this novel derives from the irreconcilability of its two halves, an irreconcilability that is reflected in the space of the city itself. Different people go about their different lives, preparing for suicide and preparing for dinner, and there is no way, the novel suggests, of building a bridge between them. Septimus and Clarissa are separated by class, by gender, and by geography, but at the same time, the novel's capacity to move from one consciousness to another suggests a kind of intimate, underground connection between them, which is borne out in Clarissa's response to the news of Septimus's death.

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel of contradictions—between men and women, between rich and poor, between self and other, between life and death. But despite these contradictions, in the flimsy possibility of a poetic union between Septimus and Clarissa, the novel points toward a reconciliation we are still waiting to realize.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mrs-Dalloway-novel-by-Woolf>

Character list (compiled by JRL)

First set: Clarissa and her friends (+ husband) [THE PAST, FRIENDSHIP]

Mrs Dalloway (Clarissa Dalloway) - now in her 50s. Main character and "centre of consciousness"

Peter Walsh, Clarissa's closest male friend. The pair playfully argue with each other all the time. Proposed to Clarissa when they were young. Easily infatuated with women. Lives in India. Unhappily married. Has unexpectedly arrived in London and will eventually attend Clarissa's party.

Sally Seton - has a rebellious disposition, smoked cigars and was sexually attracted to Clarissa as a teenager. Is now married with five boys and has become Lady Rosseter. Clarissa, Peter and Sally used to be very close.

Hugh Whitbread - An old friend of Clarissa's. The epitome of British charm. Married to **Evelyn Whitbread** (whose health is poor). Peter & Sally profoundly dislike Hugh and what he stands for.

Second set: Septimus and his wife and doctors [THE CONSEQUENCES OF WAR]

Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked WW1 veteran. Before the War, was a young, idealistic poet. His mind is broken but his perception of the world is acute. Eventually commits suicide.

Lucrezia Smith, Septimus's young wife (from Milan). Does her best to cope with her husband's sensitivity and mental illness. She herself feels lost in Britain. Misses her native Italy.

Evans - Septimus's friend and officer during the war. Killed in a battle. In a series of painful hallucinations, Septimus comes to realize that there was probably more than just friendship between the two of them.

Dr. Holmes - Septimus's personal doctor (GP), whom he despises. Persistently claims that Septimus is in good health, but advises Lucrezia to seek expert advice from Sir William.

Third set: Elizabeth and her tutor [FAMILY, EDUCATION]

Richard Dalloway - Clarissa's husband. He is a genuine philanthropist, a member of Parliament, but has a dull mind and a bland personality. A loving father and husband.

Elizabeth Dalloway - Clarissa and Richard's 17 year old daughter. Does not like parties very much and prefers the simple pleasures of the countryside (like her father). Indifferent to fashion. Likes Miss Kilman, her austere history teacher, very much.

Doris Kilman - Elizabeth Dalloway's spinsterish history teacher. Was fired from her teaching position during the war because of her German ancestry. A sharp mind, but a very bitter and disillusioned woman. A born-again Christian who both dislikes Clarissa but dotes upon young Elizabeth Dalloway.

Fourth set: London parks, streets, districts

Big Ben - St James's Park - Piccadilly - Regent Street - Harley Street, etc.

Abridged and annotated by JRL
Original (64.000 words, 187 pages)

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning-fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark!² What a plunge! How fresh, how calm 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; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"--was that it?--"I prefer men to cauliflowers"--was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace--Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished--how strange it was!--a few sayings like this about cabbages.

Having lived in Westminster--how many years now? over twenty,-- one feels even in the midst of the traffic a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. Such fools we are, Clarissa thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, why one loved life; London; this moment of June.

For it was the middle of June. The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough : John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven-over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace. And everywhere, though it was still so early, there was a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, a tapping of cricket bats; whirling young men, and laughing girls in their transparent muslins who, even now, after dancing all night, were taking their absurd woolly dogs for a run. But how strange, on entering the Park, the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-swimming happy ducks; the pouched birds waddling; and who should be coming along with his back against the Government buildings, most appropriately, carrying a despatch box stamped with the Royal Arms, who but Hugh Whitbread; her old friend Hugh--the admirable Hugh! "Good-morning to you, Clarissa!" said Hugh, rather extravagantly, for they had known each other as children. "Where are you off to?" "I love walking in London," said Mrs. Dalloway. "Really it's better than walking in the country." They had just come up--unfortunately--to see doctors. Other people came to see pictures; go to the opera; take their daughters out; the Whitbreads came "to see doctors." Times without number Clarissa had visited Evelyn Whitbread in a nursing home. Was Evelyn ill again? Evelyn was a good deal out of sorts, said Hugh, intimating by a kind of pout or swell of his very well-covered, manly, extremely handsome, perfectly upholstered body (he was almost too well dressed always, but presumably had to be, with his little job at Court) that his wife had some internal ailment, nothing serious, which, as an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway would quite understand without requiring him to specify. For Hugh always made her feel, as he bustled on,

² Lark : (bird) une alouette (phrase) to rise with the lark (Fr. se lever avec les poules, se lever aux aurores) ; (joke) rigolade, blague, farece (phrase) What a lark ! (quelle rigolade, quelle bonne blague !).

raising his hat rather extravagantly and assuring her that she might be a girl of eighteen, and of course he was coming to her party to-night, Evelyn absolutely insisted.

She could remember scene after scene at Bourton--Peter furious; Hugh not, of course, his match in any way, but still not a positive imbecile as Peter made out. When his old mother wanted him to give up shooting or to take her to Bath he did it, without a word; he was really unselfish, and as for saying, as Peter did, that he had no heart, no brain, nothing but the manners and breeding of an English gentleman, that was only her dear Peter at his worst; and he could be intolerable; he could be impossible; but adorable to walk with on a morning like this.

(June had drawn out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty. Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that.)

For they might be parted for hundreds of years, she and Peter; she never wrote a letter and his were dry sticks; but suddenly it would come over her, If he were with me now what would he say?--some days, some sights bringing him back to her calmly, without the old bitterness; which perhaps was the reward of having cared for people; they came back in the middle of St. James's Park on a fine morning--indeed they did. But Peter--however beautiful the day might be, and the trees and the grass, and the little girl in pink-- Peter never saw a thing of all that. He would put on his spectacles, if she told him to; he would look. It was the state of the world that interested him; Wagner, Pope's poetry, people's characters eternally, and the defects of her own soul. How he scolded her! How they argued! She would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase; the perfect hostess he called her (she had cried over it in her bedroom), she had the makings of the perfect hostess, he said.

So she would still find herself arguing in St. James's Park, still making out that she had been right--and she had too--not to marry him. For in marriage a little licence, 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. (Where was he this morning for instance? Some committee, she never asked what.) But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable, and when it came to that scene in the little garden by the fountain, she had to break with him or they would have been destroyed, both of them ruined, she was convinced; though she had borne about with her for years like an arrow sticking in her heart the grief, the anguish; and then the horror of the moment when some one told her at a concert that he had married a woman met on the boat going to India! Never should she forget all that! Cold, heartless, a prude, he called her. Never could she understand how he cared. But those Indian women did presumably-- silly, pretty, flimsy nincompoops. And she wasted her pity. For he was quite happy, he assured her--perfectly happy, though he had never done a thing that they talked of; his whole life had been a failure. It made her angry still. She had reached the Park gates. She stood for a moment, looking at the omnibuses in Piccadilly. She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that. She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that. Her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct, she thought, walking on.