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## **Stream of Consciousness Technique As A Narrative Tool in Virginia Woolf's 'Mrs. Dalloway'**

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**Dr. Ch. Rajaniprashanth**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Matrusri Engineering College, Hyderabad

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### **Abstract:**

The Stream of Consciousness technique in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* serves as a central narrative device, offering a window into the intricate inner lives of the characters. Through this technique, Woolf probes into the characters' fragmented thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences, enabling the reader to witness the fluid, non-linear flow of their consciousness. The novel oscillates between moments of past memories and present realities, reflecting the complexities of individual experiences and the social and political contexts of post-World War I England. This paper examines the role of Stream of Consciousness in shaping narrative structure, character development, and thematic exploration in *Mrs. Dalloway*, particularly focusing on the portrayal of time, mental illness, and identity. The technique enhances Woolf's exploration of the human psyche, emphasizing the subjective nature of reality and the disjunction between outward appearances and inner experiences. Ultimately, the Stream of Consciousness technique in *Mrs. Dalloway* is instrumental in capturing the fragmented, often disorienting nature of human thought and memory, making it a key tool in Woolf's literary innovation.

**Keywords:** Stream of Consciousness, Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, narrative technique, time, mental illness, identity, character development, modernism, etc.

### **Introduction**

Virginia Woolf, born Virginia Stephen on January 26, 1882, was the youngest daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia. She grew up in London and Cornwall. At the age of twenty-two, she became an orphan after the death of her mother in 1895 and her father in 1904. Virginia Woolf was closely associated with the Bloomsbury Group, a circle of writers and artists, including Roger Fry, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, J.M. Keynes, Desmond MacCarthy, and, to some extent, E.M. Forster. The group got its name from the London area of Bloomsbury, where many of its members lived at different times. The Bloomsbury Group was active from the time after Queen Victoria's death until the beginning of World War II. They were influenced by G.E. Moore, a Cambridge philosopher known for his book *Principia Ethica*, which focused on the importance of positive and pleasurable emotions in human life.

Woolf depicts the ceaseless stream of human consciousness, consisting of diverse elements, thoughts, past and present, beautiful and ugly, pertinent and extraneous. This stream is simultaneously clear and murky, flowing unpredictably across both past and present. She portrays the streams like an artist rather than as a photographer. Virginia Woolf's depiction of the human

mind closely aligns with her artistic vision of life. Her depiction of life as a beautiful entity is perpetually invigorated by subtle humour and keen observation; it is varied by a continuously shifting array of emotions; it is depicted by her relentless interest in all that falls within her purview, both significant and trivial. M.H.Abraham (2011) defines the term "Stream of Consciousness" as:

A mode of narration that undertakes to capture the full spectrum and flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with consciousness and half-consciousness thoughts, memories, feelings and random associations. (164)

Woolf identifies the profound malevolence in human behaviour, specifically the vice of possessiveness, the coveting of what fundamentally belongs to others by inalienable right. Through a methodical approach and incremental phases, she audaciously develops a novel artistic form. Her novels, in their utter originality, are impressionistic depictions of the infinitely minute and ephemeral components that constitute the fabric of our daily experience. Her works consist of interior monologues. Virginia Woolf's works illustrate psychological time, involuntary memory, impulses, and intuitions, concepts heavily emphasised by Bergson. She has employed the stream-of-consciousness style in the majority of her notable novels. She has explored several strategies to elucidate the enigma of the mind, integrating traditional methods with the stream-of-consciousness approach. She has not investigated the unconscious realms of the mind. Despite employing the techniques of internal monologue and stream-of-consciousness, her art neither indulges in depravity nor appears disturbed and disordered. She possesses a heightened sense of order, restraint, and a superior dignity of demeanour. She is unblemished, although we appear to inhale an exclusive environment. She illuminates the obscure, subterranean recesses of the human mind, and although she unearths weeds, nasty grasses, sludge, and viscous slime, her findings do not exude the foul odours characteristic of Joyce's work, nor does she suffer from the malaise evident in the creations of Marcel's imagination. She is, nonetheless, devoid of vitality and anaemic, rendering it ludicrous to juxtapose these nebulous figments of her imagination against the substantial works of a prior generation of novelists. The lyrical quality of her imagination and the lyricism inherent in her writing enhance the value of her work in the reader's perception. It can be asserted that her work exemplifies the stream-of-consciousness movement at its pinnacle, following a preliminary process of digestion and assimilation. According to Robert Hurley (1990),

Stream of Consciousness is employed to evince subjective as well as objective reality. It reveals the character's feelings, thoughts, and actions, often following an associative rather than a logical sequence, without commentary by the author. Widely used in narrative fiction, the technique was perhaps brought to its highest point of development in early twentieth century novels where stream of consciousness plays an important role. (19)

Woolf's accomplishment as a novelist was significant, as he probed further into human psychology and conjured a universe that exists solely in human memory and affection. James Joyce's work was bold and innovative, like that of a surgeon; however, his accomplishment was ultimately negative. She was breaking obstructive fences and eliminating impediments. In contrast to the works of Proust and Joyce, Virginia Woolf's scope is notably small and constrained. Her art possesses a lyrical rather than an epic aspect. However, it possesses a heightened feeling of order, as well as cleanliness and purity.

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Woolf prioritises character above story. She asserts that all novels pertain to character. Woolf is a prodigious prose writer. Each of her remarkable novels is structured similar to a musical composition, unfolding note by note, phrase by phrase, with crescendos and diminuendos, the passage of time being punctuated by the chimes of Big Ben. Although the author is earnest, she is not grave; the depiction of human capability contains both light-heartedness and subtle irony, as well as an element of tenderness.

Mrs. Woolf is not infallible. Her narrative approach emphasises humanity not in action, but in a condition of boundless observation. Disregarding the realm of fact, she often interrogates its significance. She juxtaposes the pursuit of truth with the monotonous inventory of external facts, striving for a spiritual certainty beneath the diverse experiences of life. The environment she constructs is constrained; her breadth of experience is similarly restricted. She possesses no understanding of existence in its unrefined state; she is also incapable of analysing the unconsciousness of individuals. The emphasis is placed on the thoughts and sentiments of the characters rather than their actions and emotions. It is unequivocal that Virginia Woolf employed the stream of consciousness approach in *Mrs. Dalloway*. This novel can be regarded as a significant experiment in this technique. In this novel, the author has employed this strategy with notable skill and artistry. Nonetheless, the subsequent aspects provide this novel an exemplary illustration of the stream-of-consciousness style.

Virginia Woolf rejects traditional plot structure. Romantic entanglements, reconciliations, nuptials, and disputes, together with conventional narrative elements, do not assist her in constructing a storyline, nor do the standard techniques of characterisation. Mrs. Woolf perceives life as a continuous stream, asserting that the novelist's role is not to depict the occurrences in an individual's life or the lives of multiple individuals, but to document the mental experiences of one or several characters.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the author chronicles the events of a single day in Mrs. Dalloway's life. The novelist aims to illustrate their influence on human cognition and relationships. The objective is to illustrate the dissemination of experience. The visual, cognitive, and emotional perceptions of the characters' awareness are documented initially by illuminating their environment and background, followed by an exploration of their inner thoughts and the perceptions of others. However, greater opportunity is afforded to the characters to disclose their true selves and to elucidate their inner realities and psychology. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf used two new writing styles: inner monologue and free indirect style. In the first method, interior monologue is shown in a roundabout way, without using the pronoun "I." In the first line of her book, she used the second method, the free indirect style. "She would buy the flowers by herself," Mrs. Dalloway said (1). The way this line is written makes it hard to understand who Mrs. Dalloway is or why she buys flowers.

The book *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place in one day, a Wednesday in the middle of June 1923. The main character in the book is Clarissa. She is telling the story. Clarissa Dalloway is getting ready for a party in the evening at the start of the story. Flower shopping for the party. Another character, Peter Walsh, loved Mrs. Dalloway in the past. As the story goes on, Mrs. Dalloway stands at the window and thinks about Peter Walsh. Later, we meet Hugh Whitbread, who is the next figure. The two of them have known each other since they were kids. Another figure in the

story is Richard Dalloway, who is married to Clarisse. Clarissa Dalloway is loved by Peter, Hugh, and Richard.

Septimus Smith and his wife Lucrezia are another figure who comes into the story. Septimus Smith, who fought in World War I (1914–18), is dealing with PTSD. He is having a hard time with the results of the war. He doesn't think life is very important. Evans, a good friend, died in the war. He keeps in touch with this lost friend and talks to them.

Septimus Warren Smith was about thirty years old, had a pale face and a beard. He wore brown shoes and a worn-out jacket, and his hazel eyes had that look of worry that makes even strangers nervous. The world has raised its sword; where will it fall? (32)

Peter walks to the park where Septimus and Lucrezia are already there. Peter can see that the couple is mad at each other and talking about committing suicide. He doesn't understand how deeply they feel. Lucrezia has a meeting with Sir William Bradshaw to try to get rid of the idea that Septimus is crazy. Ninety-six and Lucrezia go to their flat to wait for the people who will take him to the asylum. Septimus runs away from them when they get there and jumps out the window. Clarissa has a party, and Peter Walsh and Sally Seton are among the guests. Richard still hasn't been able to tell her he loves her. As soon as Sir William and Lady Bradshaw get there. Lady Bradshaw tells them that they are late because Septimus, one of Sir William's patients, killed himself that day. Clarissa is surprisingly upset about how well her party went when it's over.

The book doesn't have a typical story or tragedy. The book focuses on how the words are used rather than how the story is put together. Mrs. Dalloway thinks about her childhood in Bourton as she walks through London in the morning. This helps us figure out what she's really thinking. There is a connection between the past and the present when Clarissa thinks about what Peter said about the veggie and Peter playing with his pocket knife. In the same way, Peter feels about Clarissa, who turned him down before. On the other hand, Lucrezia tells us about Septimus's trauma, and it is her lonely drawing that makes us feel sorry for her.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf intricately explores the psychological layers of her characters, offering a deep insight into their inner conflicts, desires, and emotions. Through the innovative stream of consciousness technique, Woolf provides readers with an immediate connection to the characters' mental landscapes, allowing for a more intimate understanding of their thoughts. Clarissa Dalloway, for instance, is depicted as a woman caught in a constant tension between her past and present. Her reflections reveal her struggle with the choices made in her youth, along with the expectations society imposes on her as an adult. Clarissa's internal dialogue brings to light her existential concerns, including her search for purpose, her sense of isolation, and the conflict surrounding her sense of self. In contrast, Woolf uses Septimus Warren Smith's character to highlight the psychological scars of war. His traumatic memories and the ravages of post-traumatic stress disorder are woven through his disjointed thoughts and hallucinations of the dead. These visions convey the tragic reality of his mental disintegration and the lasting effects of violence on the human mind. Both characters serve as representations of the novel's broader themes, vulnerability, mental health, and the complex nature of human consciousness. Woolf's focus on their psychological depth invites readers to explore not only their personal struggles but also the nuanced experience of subjective reality. This approach underscores the modernist emphasis on individual consciousness, where internal experiences, rather than external actions, shape the characters' understanding of their world. Through these characters, Woolf encourages

readers to engage more deeply with the intricacies of the human psyche, emphasizing the importance of understanding mental states and the fragility of identity within the social context. (Gibbons 209).

In Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf masterfully explores the interconnected themes of time, memory, and identity, using the stream of consciousness technique to illustrate the complex ways in which these concepts shape the characters' understanding of themselves and the world around them. Time in the novel is not presented as a simple, linear sequence, but rather as something fragmented and fluid. The narrative moves back and forth between the present, past experiences, and future anticipations, highlighting the characters' nonlinear relationship with time. Clarissa Dalloway, for instance, perceives time not as a continuous progression but as a collection of intertwined moments, constantly revisiting her youth, her relationships, and the significant choices she made in her life. Through this manipulation of time, Woolf emphasizes the fluidity of memory, where past experiences continuously infiltrate the present, influencing the characters' decisions and how they perceive themselves in the world (Glickman 20).

Memory plays a crucial role in Mrs. Dalloway as a means of shaping identity. The characters' memories, particularly Clarissa's, profoundly influence their present-day understanding of themselves and their place in society. Clarissa's reflections on her younger years, her intense bond with Sally Seton, and her eventual choice to marry Richard Dalloway all serve as pivotal elements in her continuous search for meaning and self-definition. In contrast, Septimus Warren Smith's memories of the war create a fractured sense of identity, as his traumatic past continues to torment him, blurring his present reality and distorting his self-perception (Hite 742). Identity, according to Woolf, is not static but fluid, constructed through the interaction of time and memory. The characters in Mrs. Dalloway show that identities are shaped by how individuals recall their past experiences and how they interact with the world around them, emphasizing the complexities and contradictions inherent in the self. Woolf's exploration challenges conventional ideas of a fixed identity, instead offering a more dynamic and evolving understanding of who we are, how we change, and how we are shaped by the past. Through these intricate themes, Woolf demonstrates that identity is not merely a product of the present, but a continual negotiation between the past, memory, and time itself.

The time period and society in which Mrs. Dalloway is set have a big impact on the ideas and character growth of the book. When it came out in 1925, Mrs. Dalloway takes place in England after World War I, when society and politics were changing a lot. The end of the war and the disappointment it caused are central to the story and have an effect on the mental states of many characters, especially Septimus Warren Smith, whose experiences as a veteran of the war reflect the trauma and mental health problems that many soldiers went through during this time. The book shows how society felt like it was broken up and lost after the war. This is a common theme in modernist writing, which tried to deal with the uncertainty and disappointment that came after the destruction of war (Howe 19).

In terms of society, Mrs. Dalloway looks at the gender roles and class system that were very common in Britain at the time. Clarissa Dalloway is always aware of her social status as a member of the upper class, and her thoughts show how women were expected to behave and what their options were in the early 20th century. The book makes fun of strict class differences and the roles women were expected to play, especially through Clarissa's inner battles with who she is and



her desire for freedom and meaning beyond her role as a wife and mother. As the characters deal with the pressures of social expectations, the theme of social conformity vs. individual choice becomes clear.

Mrs. Dalloway also shows how society was changing at the time, such as how women's roles were changing and how modernity was changing traditional ideals. Different characters in the book, especially Clarissa and Sally Seton, show how people are reacting to these changes in society, from being stuck in a routine life to wanting to be free and express themselves. By putting these political and social details into the story, Woolf not only shows the problems of the time, but also shows how people are at odds with the social forces that affect their lives (Kaplan 183)

Putting Mrs. Dalloway in its Modernist Literature Setting

Mrs. Dalloway is one of the most famous works of modernist writing. Its main ideas and traits reflect the movement itself. The book, which came out in 1925, was written by a modernist who wanted to break away from traditional ways of telling stories and try out new techniques, structures, and points of view. Modernist writers tried to show how complicated and broken modern life is. Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway is a great example of this style because it uses the stream of consciousness method in a new way. The book jumps around between the characters' thoughts, especially those of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith. This shows how consciousness is fluid and doesn't follow a straight line, and it also shows how disconnected modern life is (Mendelson 199).

Mrs. Dalloway takes place in the years after World War I, when society and politics were in a lot of turmoil. The war had a huge impact on culture and psychology, and Woolf writes about how people in England felt traumatized, alone, and like they had lost something important in their lives. This is especially clear in Septimus, a war veteran with PTSD whose broken thoughts and loss of faith in society mirror the larger existential crisis of the time.

Modernist literature's main ideas are also explored in this book: time, memory, and identity. The broken, non-linear framework of the story reflects the characters' subjective experiences, bringing out how the past and present are not connected and how identity changes over time. Woolf challenges traditional story structures by focusing on her characters' inner lives and how they see time. This is in line with the modernist stress on the person's awareness of what's going on in the outside world (Miles 204). *Mrs. Dalloway* is a modernist book that questions traditional ways of telling stories, probes into complicated psychological issues, and speaks to the worries of people in the early 20th century. It catches the essence of modernism through its unique style and themes, and it offers a deep look at what it means to be human in a broken world.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf uses the stream of consciousness technique to provide an intricate and layered portrayal of her characters' inner worlds, offering a profound exploration of their thoughts, emotions, and psychological complexities. Unlike traditional characterization, which often relies on external actions or dialogue, Woolf's approach allows the reader to experience the characters' minds directly, creating a more intimate and detailed picture of their inner struggles. This method helps reveal the depth of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith's characters, whose internal battles and psychological states lie at the heart of the narrative (Snaith, 48).

Clarissa Dalloway's character is portrayed through fragmented, reflective thoughts that oscillate between the present moment and memories from her past. Her consciousness shifts

between her social duties, existential anxieties, and recollections of love, youth, and the choices that shaped her life. Woolf's nonlinear narrative technique allows these thoughts to jump back and forth, effectively illustrating Clarissa's ongoing search for meaning beyond the roles imposed upon her by society. As she grapples with isolation, self-identity, and the inevitability of death, Woolf's portrayal of Clarissa highlights the character's deep sense of existential longing. The constant flow of fragmented thoughts underscores the complexity of her inner life, offering a stark contrast to the rigid social structures surrounding her (Todorov, 24).

Similarly, Woolf uses stream of consciousness to explore the psychological depth of Septimus Warren Smith, a World War I veteran whose fractured mental state reveals the trauma he carries from his wartime experiences. Septimus's disjointed thoughts create a powerful portrayal of post-traumatic stress disorder, depicting the internal chaos and fragmentation caused by the horrors of war. Woolf weaves his memories, fantasies, and perceptions of reality together to demonstrate the profound disconnect and isolation he feels. His mind, often lost in time and space, reflects the lasting psychological scars left by violence and conflict. As Woolf illustrates, "The war did this to him. It had torn him apart, it had left him shattered, and now there was nothing but the silence" (Woolf, 20). Septimus's mental monologue poignantly conveys his sense of abandonment, mental fragility, and disillusionment with the world around him.

### Conclusion

Woolf offers a far more nuanced and humanized depiction of her characters. By presenting their inner lives as a blend of contradictions, desires, and fears, she invites the reader to engage with the complexities of their identities and emotional landscapes. Woolf's stream of consciousness technique thus creates a more fluid and multidimensional form of character development, breaking free from the constraints of traditional narrative structures. As Zimmerman (2010) notes, "Through this direct access to the mind, Woolf allows her characters to live and breathe beyond the page, making them not just part of the story, but a part of the reader's emotional and psychological experience." (172) The result is a vivid, direct connection to the characters' mental states, offering a profound understanding of the intricacies of human consciousness and identity. By transcending conventional storytelling techniques, Woolf crafts a narrative that captures the complexity of the human experience in ways that continue to resonate with readers.

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