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Time in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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One of the most notable techniques in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is the experiment with time. The action occurs within a single day, beginning in the morning and ending at midnight, yet characters follow their thoughts back into their past or forward into the future without expanding the chronological hours. When this novel first takes shape in Virginia Woolf's mind, she entitles it *The Hours*. It seems appropriate and significant then, if we notice the theme and her peculiar device of treating time.

As another of them, the story has a double plot. The author shows her design in her preface to the Modern Library edition: "in the first version Septimus, who later is intended to be her double, had no existence; and that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely to die at the end of the party."¹ We can trace the main plot by Clarissa's life; the other plot shows her dark side of life in Septimus. Consequently, in *Mrs. Dalloway* the conception and art of time relating to the positive-negative relationship of double plot may supply the central theme.

Considering the time which flows throughout the novel and dominates characters, we can figuratively divide it into two aspects: "psychological time" and "clock time."² Psychological time for the characters passes sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly according to the order of the author's intention. On the other hand, clock time creates a frame,

denoting and making characters conscious of the exact time.

Psychological time encloses memory and present consciousness, which are especially bound up with the moment of revelation. The moment, which is the sensitive organization of character's insight, suggests the meaning of life to characters. Most characters attain the moment of revelation emotionally and mentally on that day, and make progress by experiencing it. Particularly Clarissa experiences it through this story and reveals her growth towards self-realization. Moreover, the two worlds of Clarissa and Septimus are related to each other by the moment of time.

Clarissa has the first real moment of insight when going upstairs. She feels the "emptiness about the heart of life" (p.45) and solitude in the imagined narrowing of her bed in her attic room. Then she conceives the failure in her nature and recognizes the meaning of life, relating with her husband Richard :

... suddenly there came a moment... She could see what she lacked. ... It was something central which permeated ; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together... she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt... It was a sudden revelation... Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination ; a match burning in a crocus ; an inner meaning almost expressed. (pp.46-47)

Clarissa's illumination, "a match burning in a crocus," reaches the moment in which the meaning of life becomes illuminated, which for Woolf is a "luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."³ Next, the image of death, "the candle half-burnt" (p.47) takes shape in her thoughts.

Clarissa senses her lack of love and meaning of life, but her realization is still not fully perceived.

Reflecting on her old age, she has a "sudden spasm, as if, while she mused, the icy claws had had the chance to fix in her" (p.54). Although she feels fear of age and death, which attacks human beings unexpectedly, "Clarissa plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there—the moment of this June morning ... seeing the delicate pink face ... of Clarissa Dalloway ; of herself" (p.54). Forty pages before, she feels her loss of personality; thinking that "now this body ... seemed nothing ... this being Mrs. Dalloway, not even Clarissa any more ... " (p.14). In this state, however, she grows vaguely from Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway to Clarissa herself. This is another step of the fully developed moment.

In the midst of the successful party, which had been her most serious concern, Clarissa still has the feeling of a "hollowness." At that time, she learns the death of Septimus by her guest Dr. Bradshaw. The world of Septimus, running parallel with the main world of Clarissa, seemed to have no immediate link until this scene. The shell-shocked Septimus had a rich sensibility which kept him from believing in the reality of the social world and eventually led to defeat and the suicidal moment. The echo of his death survives in Clarissa's mind, so that she recalls the awful fear which lies hidden in the positive depth of her mind. With her awareness of her mind's relation with life, she realizes "her disaster—her disgrace" (p.282). She appreciates that the important thing in life is the sacred soul, which had been tarnished by her daily life full of the illusion of mundane reality. Subsequently she attains her mastery of selfhood and of life, which had been lost in "the process of living." Therefore, now, she is more profoundly touched with the pure core of integrity that Septimus preserved by suicide. "A thing

there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved" (p.280). Instinctively she shared with Septimus his need for death, so that she is saved and refreshed. The last tragedy of Clarissa becomes unnecessary. Her clinging to life leads her to the final realization which accepts death. She senses, "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt, to communicate" (p.280).

Clarissa's final revelation at the party, viewed only through psychological time, is not complete, unless another major element, clock time, is considered.

On the other hand, clock time exists out of the story, stimulates characters' emotions and summons their past memories. Throughout the story, Big Ben and St. Margaret's chimes, denoting the exact hour to characters, mostly, enable the author to shift from one character's consciousness into another's and change the scene. Big Ben is especially significant, partly because its symbol serves as the reference of time and life itself, which conveys the key tone of this novel, and partly because it sets a 'frame' towards the chaotic world of inner life.

At the first appearance, Woolf defines one of the images of Big Ben; Clarissa feels a "solemnity," and "suspense" before it strikes. "There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air" (p.5). This last refrain echoes with Big Ben and spreads not only its sound but also its associated image with each toll. This makes Clarissa conscious of loving life: "what she loved; life; London; this moment of June" (p.5). "What she loved was this, her, now, in front of her" (p.12). The more strong this attachment towards life becomes in her consciousness, the more intensely it invokes her fear of growing old and of dying, because she

conceives that time is irrevocable. She asked herself ; “Did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely ; all this must go on without her ; did she resent it ; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely” (p.12). Thus, Big Ben carries the image of transitory and mutable nature of human life.

After the dramatic meeting between Clarissa and Peter, the clock strikes, expanding their emotions, and they both have the rushed memories of Bourton. The chimes are accompanied by her words “Remember my party to-night” (p.72), so that Big Ben makes the party one of the main tones. Most of Clarissa’s day and the novel itself is concerned with the preparation of her party, which gives her the flavor of life. She thinks of the party as an “offering” for bringing people together in life.

Big Ben’s stroke “died up there among the sea-gulls—twelve o’clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street” (p.142). The gulls are associated with the image of death. Therefore Big Ben may well invoke the problem of life and death in the character’s consciousness and also connects Clarissa with Septimus figuratively ; two worlds are related to each other by sharing the exact time.

Furthermore, Big Ben leads us to the significant scene. “How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching to see the old lady . . . move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string . . . She was forced, by that sound, to move, to go—but where?” (pp.192—93). The old lady symbolizes human solitude and the privacy of the soul, which Clarissa tries so intensely to keep for herself that Clarissa is affected by the scene of the old lady’s isolation.⁴

In the midst of the party, when Clarissa steps aside to the little solitary room, feeling the emotion caused by Septimus’ death, once

more, this old lady affects her. Clarissa could not solve the previous question "where?" by love and religion, yet she does by realization of the deep human meaning of life. She is now able to identify with Septimus, as we observed through her moment of revelation, which brings to her a "shock of delight." It forces her to move to the window. She watches: "Oh, but how surprising!—in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her!" Then she thinks: "It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed" (p.283).

At this moment, "the clock began striking," which makes her aware that time is so irrevocable that it is going on without showing any pity to that young man's death. This idea makes her feel that "she did not pity him; with all this going on" (p.283), even in the darkness. "The compulsion of the time-flow"⁵ caused her terror of time once in the morning, because she loved life so intensely, feeling that "this life to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely" (p.281).

It is then that Shakespeare's words from *Cymbeline* comes to her: "Fear no more the heat of the sun" (p.283). In this state, she could have triumphed over time, by identifying with Septimus and conquering her dread of death and time. "She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away" (p.283). Therefore, even if again the clock is striking and "its leaden circles dissolves in the air," she never feels fear of time. Here, Clarissa attains a state of full self-recognition, by grasping the meaning of Septimus' vision, which he could communicate only by death. This self-awareness of Clarissa is the climactic episode of this novel, which is evoked and completed by the union of the three lives which cross symbolically in the little room with the clock tolling outside the scene.

The phrase "Fear no more the heat o' the sun" may be significant, considering Clarissa's self-realization, the relation between Clarissa and Septimus, and the image of time. Her diary discloses her design of *Mrs. Dalloway*: "I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and insane side by side,"⁶ which this motif may explain. This phrase recurs three times to Clarissa and once in Septimus' consciousness.

As Clarissa reads this phrase in the book spread before her, she asks herself: "What was she trying to recover? What image of white dawn in the country?" (p.52). This failure of her recovery suggests the inadequacy of her realization. She remembers this refrain because of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her. Lady Bruton makes her fear time itself, because of her understanding of life. Therefore these words have an ironic meaning for her, since she still fears time. The phrase, however, gathers new and more significant meaning with each use and comes to have its true sense in Clarissa's mind.

Secondly, the words return to Clarissa, when she is sewing her party dress, just before Peter's sudden visit, as if this motif predicted it. "That's all... Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea... the wave breaking; the dog barking, far barking and barking" (p.59). This phrase is deliberately repeated in Septimus' momentary return of tranquil sanity, just before his suicide: "... far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body... He was not afraid. At every moment Nature signified by some laughing hint..." (p.211). Thus, this dirge brings the two different personalities together and sets them in a symmetrical relationship. Before he leaps from the window, he thinks: "He didn't want to die. Life was good. The sun hot" (p.226). The last words are the trans-

figuration of "the heat o' the sun," which reveals that Septimus has reached the glorification of life beyond his death. He receives it in full meaning; on the other hand, Clarissa fails to comprehend of the real meaning of it. She, however, gets her final understanding guided by his motivation.

Finally as we viewed, this refrain occurs in Clarissa's transcendental thought, and she realizes its true meaning. In her present state of self-recognition, she perceives that Septimus "made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (p.284). This identification of Clarissa with Septimus brings together two threads of speculations on life, death and time. Associated with her love of life, comes the opposite emotion which accepts death. Clarissa's insight is slight and tenuous in a sense and never defined by the author; however it seems to be profoundly meaningful to her.

In Clarissa's final soliloquy at the climactic scene, the many threads of the theme are woven together. The function of time is not just Virginia Woolf's technique to unify the novel, but it is a key element of the theme. There is harmony between theme and technique.

Notes

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1925)

1. Virginia Woolf, Introduction, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: The Modern Library, 1928), p. vi.
2. Graham explains it in his essay as "the world of mind time" and "world of linear time." Richter does it as "the real (or psychological) time" and "clocktime." John Graham, "Time in the novels of Virginia Woolf", *University Toronto Quarterly*, 18 (January 1949), 186.
Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf; The Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp.39-40.
3. Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction", *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1925) p.212.

4. Graham, 187. He rightly explains that Clarissa “sees the supreme mystery : that people exists in the same stream of time, each moving under the compulsion of the timeflow (as symbolized by Big Ben), visible to each other, yet unknown to each other and essentially alone.”
5. Ibid.
6. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, (October 14, 1922) ed., Leonard Woolf (New York : Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953) p.51.