

## War in Mrs. Dalloway: A theme for Plot Unification

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### Abstract

Anywhere we look in the world, war is always considered to be a devastating force. It destroys whatever comes in its way and has never failed to leave its marks on the pages of history, society, literature etc. English literature has many noteworthy texts which uses war as its backdrop or even the main concept for the plot. One such masterpiece in which war and war experiences play a major role is *Mrs. Dalloway*, one of the most important gifts of Virginia Woolf to the world of modern literature. In this text war acts as a backdrop, a theme and a binding and unifying agent. It brings together the otherwise scattered plot and characters who have very little in common amongst them, except their direct or indirect experiences of / with the war. Through this paper I will try to show how war unites almost all the characters and subsequently the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway* together into a single whole in the post-war condition of the world.

### Keywords:

1. War.
2. Literature
3. Scattered plot and characters
4. Unifying agent
5. War experiences
6. Destruction and devastation.

### Introduction

War is always a devastating force. The clash of ideas and opinions among the humans are the main causes of war. Although the humans are solely responsible for causing mass devastation through wars, there are very few, if any, benefits that we can reap from it. All the wars that mankind have gone through, whether major or minor, have left its imprint on the history and literature of its period. The effect of such a war on one of the major literary pieces of the modern world is what I sought to understand and explain through this paper.

Virginia Woolf's name figure as one of the canons of modern literature. She believed in breaking the 'frame' set for literature by her predecessors and writing out of the box and led by example in this. One of her most famous and celebrated works, *Mrs. Dalloway*, is a prime example of this very philosophy. This novel, recounting the incidents of a single day, is a masterpiece in itself. Woolf applies the techniques of stream of consciousness and tunnelling process in this text. The text doesn't have a proper and fixed plot; neither does it have characters who interact with each other on a normal basis. Infact, most of the characters, including the leading characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, are completely unaware of each other's presence and never meet each other throughout the course of the whole novel. A majority of the plot progresses through interior monologues. In such a scenario the presence of an unifying agent is very essential for the story to take its complete shape and form. In the case of this text, this role is played by war or the experiences of the war that almost all the characters of the text have gone through. *Mrs. Dalloway* has multiple characters whose lives have been directly or indirectly affected by the war and hence war comes out to play the role of the unifying agent in this story.

### Critical Reading of the Text

The way war and its aftermath is portrayed in *Mrs. Dalloway* makes one doubt even the basic certainties about how we live in time, about family, property, and the future. The importance and significance of 'war' both as a theme and as an unifying agent is established in the very second page of the story, even before the introduction of all the main characters to the readers. This itself exerts the war and all its related issues in the plot of the novel. The reference is not vague but direct and there can be no confusions in understanding that the writer is referring to the First World War when she remarks –

“For it was the middle of June. The war was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opens a bazaar, they say, with the telegraph in her hand, John, her favourite, killed ; but it was over ; thank heaven – over.”

(Woolf, Virginia; *Mrs. Dalloway*, Page 6 -7)

Another thing that we need to take into account from the quoted lines is the way people dealt with the war experiences. The society that Virginia Woolf mentions in this novel is basically high class English society. This society was not directly hit by the war calamities, only some rare instances here and there. Because of this some people like Clarissa don't have a clear understanding of the war. Others, like Mrs. Foxcroft and Lady Bexborough are unable to express their great grief clearly and are portrayed as being rather materialistic, not sentimental and emotional. Maybe they understood that what was gone can never come back and they need to continue with their lives or maybe that was the only way they knew of to cope with their pain of loss , but the writer makes no remark about it.

Septimus Warren Smith, a victim of shell-shock who had been suffering from it since the war is treated as Clarissa's double in the text. Clarissa Dalloway is the main protagonist of the novel as revealed by the fact that the novel is named after her. Clarissa had no personal affect of the war but her alter personality is someone who has not been able to let go of the war and its traumatic effects even though it had been over for almost five years. But the common thread between the two is that they both keep thinking about death and in the end while Septimus succumbs to his fears, Clarissa rejoices in the news of his death, although both of them were complete strangers.

“She felt somehow very like him – the young man who had killed himself.

She felt glad he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living.”

(Woolf, Virginia; *Mrs. Dalloway* ; Page – 204)

Clarissa's obsession with death can be seen to be a result of the internal war of thoughts, feelings and emotions that goes on continuously within her while one of the reasons of Septimus's death is his guilt of being left alive while he lost almost all his friends in the war; including a very close friend who is referred to multiple times in the text, Evans. The war that we encounter in the text is not only references to the real thing but also psychological. Septimus' condition also helps us to understand the far-reaching effects of war. It shows how one is not able to overcome such experiences easily and it also affects the people surrounding them.

“Septimus’s shell-shock is a symptom of war’s reach across time . . . The novel gives us very little of war as such, but its snapshot of Septimus wandering through London shows how fully its violence can be carried forward . . . *Mrs. Dalloway* shows how war enters the consciousness of a city, of a culture, and of modernity. ”

(Blackwell, Wiley; *A Companion to Virginia Woolf* ; Page : 348)

While talking about war, Lucrezia Warren Smith, the twenty four years old wife of Septimus is a character which can’t be left out. She too becomes an indirect victim of the war because of her husband. She could never get the happy married life she always wished for because of her husband’s shell-shocked condition. She went through many hardships at her young age because of this and ultimately became a very young widow when Septimus committed suicide unable to bear the burden of his war memories any longer. Her kind of war effect can also be stated as psychological.

There are some other characters whose lives were affected by the war. Miss Doris Kilman is someone whose life was completely altered because of the war. She lost her brother in the war and was fired from her job because of her German sounding surname and her opinions not being in complete favour of England. She was someone who looked at both sides of things and hence had to bear the consequence of it and live her life in abject poverty after the war. Later on she grew to hate and resent people like Clarissa Dalloway who continued to live their comfortable and easy life, least affected by the war; while people like her, although innocent, had to suffer the burnt of it.

“They turned her out because she would not pretend that the Germans were all villains – when she had German friends, when the only happy days of her life had been spent in Germany!”

(Woolf, Virginia; *Mrs. Dalloway* ; Page : 136)

Mr. Brewer also had a little experience of the horrors of the war. He knew Septimus before the commencement of the war and saw the changes it brought into his life afterwards. He had also experienced the effects of war bombardments. A bomb was dropped in his garden, destroying his prized germaniums and leaving his cook’s nerves destroyed. Something of the similar kind happened to Miss Helena Perry, Clarissa’s aunt too. A bomb was dropped at her very door and reading through the accounts related to her in the text we can come to the conclusion that she had never been able to come out of this shock.

Even Peter Walsh, another important character of the story makes a passing reference to war and how the sufferings and losses of the war are almost forgotten by the unaffected people only after five years of its end, when he looks at the young boys marching up and down the streets of London.

“ Really it was a miracle thinking of the war, and thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shovelled together, already half forgotten ; it was a miracle.”

(Woolf , Virginia; *Mrs. Dalloway*; Page : 127)

There are many characters in the novel and as documented above, their lives were affected by the war in different ways. The war left the people with physical defects, as well as psychological effects, both long and short term. The exact extent of these effects can’t be evaluated from the reading and evaluation of a single text. But it can clearly give us a glimpse and an idea about the complete picture.

## Conclusion

As we see in the novel, there are many characters, both major and minor, whose lives were affected by the war. Many of them had no acquaintance with the other or they knew about the other only through someone else's dialogue. But this commonality of war experiences, both direct and indirect, is something that links them together and binds the whole novel in a common thread. Woolf, in the novel, represents a society that collectively suffers. Despite Clarissa's best attempts to remain immune to the devastations and evade death, it appears at her party. Almost all the characters touched by the war are present at her party or they are being referred to by the other characters. The party in my view completes this thread of plot unification.

No actual war takes place in the story, but it is the aftermath of the World War I that the characters are trying to overcome. The theme of war is established right in the beginning of the novel and its prominence and presence is felt till the very end. Virginia Woolf very beautifully incorporates the effects of war into each character and that each character was aware of the war is clearly shown. They may not have been affected directly but it seems that war had left its lasting effects on the whole of England and its people and this novel, situated in the heart of London with its myriad of characters is unable to escape this fate. So in conclusion we can say that war really plays a very significant part in this novel and binds the plot, the characters and the sentiments of each character into an unified whole. Without the presence of the theme of war it would have been very difficult, or rather impossible, for Virginia Woolf to bring together different stories and incidents related to different people, scattered throughout London , and present it to her readers as an unified whole, as a complete text.

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