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THE EXPERIENCE OF LIFE IN LONDON THROUGH LITERARY NARRATIVE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS DALLOWAY

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Abstract

This study aims to establish the relationship between literature and the urban environment of London in terms of the role the city plays the human mind. In this respect, it aims to answer the following questions, using Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925, as the main textual source: How is literature as a narrative tool used to create connections between the urban environment and urban events, and how does the city serve as a means of exploring and integrating various areas of experience? In her approach to narrative, Virginia Woolf considered humanistic details and their relationship with everyday life and urban experience. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf examines the physical description of London that defines the class and gender of the city's inhabitants, and also distinguishes between past and present events. By following the journeys of the protagonist and other characters around London, the reader gets a sense of their every thought. This paper offers literary clues to the experience derived from London based on the story's main observers (Clarissa and Peter Walsh). It also provides descriptions of Woolf's narratives of the urban context of London after the First World War, giving the reader a glimpse of the city at the time. Since awareness of the city as a complete and living entity did much to shape social life, one of the principal lines of analysis is the evolution of an urban self-consciousness and its influence on the development and experience of London. As such, emotional responses to its form and content are possible, and these play a fundamental role in the shaping of urban experience.

Keywords: literature, urban experience, flâneur, Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway, London

Introduction

It is commonly accepted that literature generally shares similar characteristics with the concept of space. This concept of space where an event or story occurs is referred to as the physically existing environment. To create a story or event, a literary writer tries to provide the reader with a new mental image of life by combining a represented place in the real world with imaginary created spaces (Azizi and Afrougheh, 2013). Literary works often rely on evocative description of the protagonist's environment (the house, the street or the city), within which the narrative can unfold (Grafe, Klaske and Maaskant, 2006). The word 'literary' is concerned with the writing, study or content of literature. Through literature, this tool is able to provide its reader with a different perspective as to how a text was written, the meaning derived from it, the intended audience, and the purpose it was written for. The focus on the issue of space has been challenging process most major writers. For example, Michel Foucault stated that "*the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time*" (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1984). Sometimes representations of spaces are a mere copy of real places; sometimes they are wholly imaginary in order to represent perfect imagined places.

As a key concept in literary and cultural studies, spatiality has emerged through a critical focus on the spatial turn. This offers a new approach to traditional literary analyses of time and history (Tally, 2012). The description of

spaces, be they a city, a building, a room, a bar etc., act as a catalyst in the development of the narrative through which a writer creates a spatial experience that is both individual and universal to provide an experience that can be understood by others. The outcome of human experience can be regarded as a narrative. One way to give meaning to places is through literature, which proves that literary works have the power to influence reality. The content of this paper discusses Virginia Woolf as an author and her literary style, with a summary of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* and an analysis of the theme: the art of walking the street. The paper concludes by creating connections between narrative and spaces. The research aims to answer the following questions: How is literature used as a narrative tool to create connections between the urban environment and events? How does the city serve as a means of exploring and integrating various areas of experience?

This paper focuses on the role of London as experienced by the observer, with a further analysis of several urban spaces that Woolf writes about in the city. To determine the description of London through Virginia Woolf's narratives, the analysis primarily draws on her 1925 novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), an English writer and novelist, is considered as one of the most important pioneers of twentieth-century modernist literature (Szasz, 2006), and is highly regarded for her thoughtful techniques of innovative fiction and insightful contributions to literary criticism (Al-Ali, 2012).

Woolf became a famous English literature writer with her use of "stream of consciousness", a technique in literary criticism to depict ideas, thoughts and feelings that pass through the human mind (Bouzid, 2013, pp. 8 & 14). Her literary style uses language does not follow traditional literary techniques, which allows her works to create deeper insights into the character's psychology. In her narratives, Woolf also explores important concepts of time, memory, and the character's inner consciousness (Bouzid, 2013, p. 24). Woolf's novels center on this consciousness rather than on sequences of events that happen in the world. Influenced by the works of French writer Marcel Proust and Irish writer James Joyce, among others, Woolf strove to create a literary form that would convey inner life (Bouzid, 2013, p. 28).

The narratives in *Mrs. Dalloway* take place in a single day (Fernald, 2013), telling the story of two seemingly unconnected characters. The plot narrates the events in one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a [high-society](#) woman, Clarissa, who walks through her London neighborhood to prepare for the party she will host that evening. As stated by Spurr (2012, p.65), the plot is composed of "the movements of a series of characters through the space of a city (in this case London) on a single day in the middle of June". Her story is told alongside that of Septimus Warren Smith, although the paths of these two characters never meet. Septimus, whose character is portrayed as a working-class war veteran, has carried psychological scars since returning from the First World War, and eventually commits suicide. Woolf's use of stream of consciousness enables her to take the reader into the thoughts and minds of her characters.

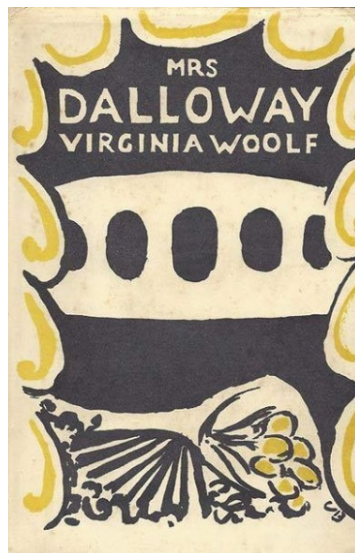


Figure 1: Vanessa Bell's design for the novel's original 1925 dust jacket (Fernald, 2013)

The Art of Walking the Street: Flâneur and Flâneuse

Flânerie, the dual activity of walking and observing constitutes a spatial and visual negotiation of the urban landscape. The concept of the flâneur, who is seen as the casual wanderer and observer of street-life in the modern city, was first explored in the writings of Baudelaire. According to Baudelaire, the flâneur, a man with good taste, wandered the streets of nineteenth-century Paris looking at and listening to the ever-changing life of a modern city (Seal, 2013). The concept was redefined by the twentieth-century German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin to refer to a leisurely male stroller with an ambiguous role in the changing metropolis. When walking the streets as an observer, both men and women share an experience of space, time, self and others (Berman, 2000), although the possibility of the female flâneuse raises fundamental questions about the role of women in urban public life (Peterson, 2007). As stated by Spurr (2012), Benjamin's theory of the flâneur "brings in the spotlight the act of walking in a city, one of the most important spatial practices enacted by human beings".

In another of her novels, *Street Haunting*, Woolf suggests that city streets provide the female flâneuse the opportunity to be incorporated into the rest of city life (Woolf, 2005). Woolf details the experiences of the flâneuse and what she sees around her; the art of walking thus translates into the act of writing. To the *flâneur*, the goal is to derive experiences from the surrounding by wandering the streets (Dobson, 2002). In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf suggests elements of flânerie. Though its title indicates a focus on an interior space, the novel's narrative records a move from Oxford to London and the British Museum before the narrator sits down to write about her journey (Woolf, 2002). **Every personal story becomes a part of the story of the city and its own memory.** This memory can only be created through seeing, and the act of seeing is fully achieved through walking the city to experience its sights and sounds.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, London's story is made up of the personal stories of the novel's characters. The method of flânerie binds their activities together, providing experiences peculiar to each individual as they move through the streets of London. The experience of London, derived through these characters' movements, is dominated by symbols of authority, such as Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace and St Paul's Cathedral, and the sound of Big Ben (Seal, 2012b). The city provides an environment that enables exploration of the personal, cultural and literary lives of its people. Through narrative, Woolf describes London's physical features, depicting an environment that enforces separation between class, gender and social strata, each living in a different London based on their experiences as they move through the streets (Seal, 2012b) The art of walking the streets of London creates opportunities to experience the city first-hand as the characters encounter an urban environment full of life, with buses, cars, trains and people living their daily lives.



Figure 2: Map of Westminster from 1917 (Fernald, 2013)

Mrs. Dalloway opens with Clarissa, who is considered the main flâneuse, standing poised at the roadside on Bond Street waiting to cross over to Victoria Street and finish various errands before her party. At that period, both these streets were busy, modern city streets. Yet, they simultaneously evoke, and serve as symbols of wealth, power and tradition; qualities that embody the Empire they represent. The flâneuse is able to wander freely around the streets of London, where her freedom of movement is determined by her class position rather than her gender (Seal, 2012b). The sense of power and privilege is symbolized as follows:

“But there could be no doubt greatness was seated within; greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand’s-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first and last time, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state which will be known to curious antiquaries, sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement” (Woolf, 2003, p. 19).

Previously the streets had been the realm only of men, women escorted by men or women who had to resort to prostitution to survive. The early twentieth-century, however, saw an improvement in policing and street lighting in central London (Seal, 2012c). Although Clarissa’s motivation for walking through the streets of central London has to do with her need to prepare for her party that evening, the art of walking the streets provides her with the opportunity to experience the city and analyze the key relationships in her life:

“Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, 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? But that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived” (Woolf, 2003, p. 11).

Other characters are also plotted precisely as they walk the streets of London: across Green Park, -along Fleet Street, and always within a certain area of central London, not more than a mile or so from Westminster Bridge (Fernald, 2013). As Clarissa moves through London’s streets, her thoughts wander between memories of the past as London is still recovering from war. This art of street walking forms a connection between the city and the human mind, allowing the observer to create mental images of what one sees. It provides an experience that could not have been derived from any other means of exploring the city; it creates a passage through with the

observer travels around the city. The reader is then taken into the mind of the character through narratives to create a link between city, mind and narrative.

Peter Walsh is the main flâneur in the novel, presented as being able to wander the streets with freedom. He notices an attractive young woman as he walks through Trafalgar Square:

“But she’s extraordinarily attractive, he thought, as, walking across Trafalgar Square in the direction of the Haymarket, came a young woman who, as she passed Gordon’s statue, seemed, Peter Walsh thought (susceptible as he was), to shed veil after veil, until she became the very woman he had always had in mind; young, but stately; merry, but discreet; black, but enchanting” (Woolf, 2003, p. 59).

Woolf’s depiction of Walsh’s attempt to pick up this woman, deflates his confident desires with the realisation that he will never possess her. He follows her, but as she reaches her house she quickly turns and snubs him.

The experience derived from walking the streets of the city depends on whether the observer is flâneur or flâneuse. While the flâneur is able to wander the streets of London with freedom, the flâneuse, becomes objectified, with restrictions on what parts of the city she can visit. The city is intimately linked with the lives of the characters, most importantly the main female protagonist, Clarissa.

Experience of the Changing Modern City

Another form of experience derived from the city came about as a result of the growth of the city. Virginia Woolf explores this imaginative act of going in and out of the human mind as people move through the city’s streets in London. As the city grows and modern development takes place, there is an effect on the city’s inhabitants and the spaces they occupy (Berman, 2000). London was important to the development of modernism, one key reason being it was the world’s biggest city in the early part of the twentieth-century. Its rapid expansion gave its inhabitants a sense of consciousness (Seal, 2012a). Representing the changes London experienced after the First World War, Richard Dalloway experiences terrible traffic at Piccadilly Circus, thereby recording an ongoing London problem of the time. This was a period when buses, hand- and horse-drawn carts, carriages, automobiles and pedestrians all competed to cross streets at a time when traffic signals still had to be changed manually by a traffic officer (Fernald, 2013). As Clarissa walks along Piccadilly towards Bond Street, she looks into Hatchard’s, then as now a leading bookshop, and shops at Lord Byron’s bookshop, which had catered to the elite since 1797. When she thinks of having been to parties at Devonshire House, however, she marks the passage of time (Fernald, 2013).

“Woolf is more concerned with a dialectic between domestic space and the urban landscape. She shares with her architectural contemporaries a passion for the dematerialization of solid boundaries and for the interpenetration of interior and exterior space” (Spurr, 2012). From Victorian times onwards, women’s participation in the life of the city gradually moved from the domestic to the public setting. From the early twentieth century, middle-class women particularly gained a range of new freedoms (Seal, 2012c). As captured in the novel, such freedoms included walking the streets alone, at least in certain districts during the daytime, the freedom to work, within certain limits, and the freedom to wander through the commercial districts of major cities and shop. Working-class women had always been free to wander the streets of the city, provided their movements were strictly related to their work or family responsibilities (Seal, 2012c).

When it comes to modern environments and the experiences derived from them, these cut across boundaries like geography, ethnicity, class, nationality and religion. Thus, modernity can be said to bring about the unity of all humankind (Berman, 2000). In this novel, Woolf brings the lives of the characters together as they experience life through walking. She takes the reader into the minds of different characters as they wander the streets of London, so various styles of speaking and thinking can be perceived from the narrative. Because Woolf was concerned with what reality looked like from each person’s point of view, what and how each character thinks is very different.

Conclusion

One of the principal lines of enquiry is the evolution of an urban self-consciousness and its influence on the development and experience of London. The awareness of the city as a complete and living entity did much to shape social life. As such, emotional responses to its form and content are possible, and these play a fundamental role in shaping urban experience. Part of Woolf's point was to demonstrate through this book how life had changed after the war; life was not so neat and tidy anymore.

With her approach to narrative, Virginia Woolf was a writer who anticipated modern interests in small human details and everyday life. By following the journey of the two main characters (Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith) around London, the reader gets a sense of their every thought. Woolf is also able to describe the urban context of London after the First World War, giving the reader a glimpse of the city at the time. From the beginning, Woolf makes it clear that everyday life as lived by normal people can be captivating; she suggests that the small things are the very moments that make life meaningful. *Mrs. Dalloway* confirms that life in London is particularly interesting and that even the most normal person has something worthwhile to say.

However large or small, the city is regarded as a space to be understood, defined by different variables like history, landscape, social class and the experience derived from walking the street (which depends on whether the observer is a flâneur or flâneuse). *Mrs. Dalloway* is a literary work that is enriched by the use of a narrative that reveals the thoughts and feelings of its characters through the simple act of walking. This takes the observer back in time to relive memories so that the representation of space can be revived in this particular world again, as emphasized throughout this novel.

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