

# Virginia Woolf and her literary alter ego in 'Mrs. Dalloway'

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## Abstract

'Mrs Dalloway' has been considered one of the most representative novels belonging to the English literature of the XX Century due to the narrative technique employed by her author Virginia Woolf ("stream of consciousness" and her peculiar perspective of time) as well as the great variety of Modernist topics included in her work (homosexuality, frustration, suicide and isolation of the individuals in the society, among others). It could be said that this Modernist writer made of this novel an autobiographical composition reflecting herself in two of the main characters: Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith.

**Keywords:** Virginia woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Modernism, "stream of consciousness", fragmentation, multiperspectivism

**Título:** Virginia Woolf y su alter ego literario en 'Mrs. Dalloway'.

## Resumen

"Mrs Dalloway" ha sido considerada como una de las obras más representativas de la literatura inglesa del siglo XX gracias a la técnica narrativa empleada por su autora Virginia Woolf ("stream of consciousness" y su peculiar perspectiva del tiempo), así como la gran cantidad de temas Modernistas que incluyó en su obra (homosexualidad, frustración, suicidio y distanciamiento de los individuos en la sociedad entre otros). Podría decirse que esta escritora Modernista hizo de esta obra una composición autobiográfica reflejándose en los dos personajes principales de la obra: Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway y Septimus Smith.

**Palabras clave:** Virginia woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, Modernismo, "stream of consciousness", fragmentación, multiperspectivismo.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this essay is to provide an explanation about one of the most remarkable female authors within the Modernist period, Virginia Woolf; as well as the autobiographical aspects or elements (represented within the characters) she decided to reflect within her famous composition called *Mrs. Dalloway*. As it is probably known, this novel has been considered over time as one of the most remarkable and important compositions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature due to both the narration technique this author carried out within her novel (stream of consciousness, multi perspectivism, subjective employment of time using flashbacks, memories, and continuous references to the past), as well as the great amount of modernist themes in which she based her novel (frustration in life, alienation among the people, sexual repression, homosexuality, importance of social position and desires of committing suicide, among others) (Schüller, 2005: 2).

The life of Virginia Woolf was really hard since the very beginning due to the death of several relatives, the sexual abuses suffered during her youth, and the terrible consequences that all these facts caused her: a terrible mental illness that accompanied her during her entire life and which finally made her to commit suicide when she was 59 years old (Whitworth, 2005: 3-4). This novel has been considered as an autobiographical one because of her own reflection on the two main figures of the composition, especially in Septimus, as well as the criticism she carried out about both Victorianism and its society, which can be seen within the whole novel.

Among all the Modernist authors I have studied, I consider Virginia Woolf as the indisputable master of all of them because, despite of the difficulties she presents to get a good understanding of her creations, her literary abilities are amazing. And even more if it is taken into account that she did not attend school or University and the only academic training she received was from her father using the familiar library. Probably, her life can be considered as one of the most difficult ones; and what has captivated me is her apparent facility of transforming not only her own sufferings and restlessness, but also those of the whole Modernist period.

This work is going to be divided into three main sections. The first one will deal with both the social and historical context of the author. The second one will be focused on the explanation of the life of Virginia Woolf as well as a brief and general study of her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. And in the third section, I will provide an explanation about the real matter of this essay: the psychological and personal aspects she decided to incorporate in her work. To carry out this task, I will not focus the attention only in the motifs or symbols, but also in the characters that appear in this novel. In order to get a better understanding of *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is important to take into account both the historical context and the characteristics of the society to which this author belonged to.

## 1. SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before starting with the life of this important novelist, it must be taken into account that the social context in which Virginia Woolf lived and pertained to, or in other words, Modernism, was highly influenced by several important changes through history (industrialization and the elevated number of unemployed people, as well as the hard effects the recent First World War supposed to this society). The results of all these events were a deep crisis of faith among the individuals due to the decline of certain moral values generally accepted, and the common feelings of alienation, sense of lost, frustration, or anxiety (Schüller, 2005: 2).

Modernism in the English literature basically started as a position contrary to Victorianism, which is considered a long historical period which officially began in 1837 (the year Queen Victoria occupied the throne), and finished in 1901. Although it has been commonly said by some scholars such as George P. Landow that this period of time was characterized, among other features, for being related to some terms such as conventional, really traditional, and old – fashioned (“Victorian and Victorianism.” *victorianweb.org*), probably this description only belongs to some parcels of its society (especially the middle classes) which were convinced that they will achieve the advantageous position the nobles enjoyed, following these traditional values and moralities (“The Victorian Period.” *faculty.unlv.edu*).

During the 20th century art movement, some authors like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (widely known as being the most remarkable ones) used their compositions in order to produce, through the psychological analysis they made of their characters (which constitute one of the main topics of their works) a critical thinking about this society in particular. Just because of these comments concerning the human affairs, modernist artists (and specially writers) incorporated - and in some cases even based - their works on those themes, a fact that constitutes one of the major and particular features of this period. It has been taken as truth that this kind of literary compositions received the denomination of *The literature of Trauma* (DeMeester, 1998).

## 2.VIRGINIA WOOLF: HER LIFE AND WORKS

### 2.1 The life of Virginia Woolf

Adeline Virginia Stephen was born in 1882, and died in 1941<sup>1</sup>. These are curious dates if it is taken into account that are exactly the same as James Joyce’s, the modernist author with whom Woolf was often compared during most of her life. Dealing with the familiar environment which surrounded Virginia, it can be said that it was really closed to letters in general, and that is why she considered herself a privileged person. However, analyzing her life in a broad way, it can be demonstrated that she did enjoy neither an easy nor comfortable personal and social life as a result of a series of events I will further explain below. Her mother was a nurse named Julia Prinsep Stephen who wrote a book specialized on the medicine field; and her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was a man with a deep interest in history and a literary critic. Both had been espoused and widowed before, providing a total of four half – siblings of their previous marriages to the family established in London. In addition to them, the matrimony had three children together, including Virginia. Although it has not been proved as the right affirmation, it seems that the troubles in her life began during her youth. Her half - brothers (on the part of her mother) abused her on several occasions, provoking her first nervous breakdown. Since then, the death of Julia (her mother) when she was only 13 years old, the one of her father, and the suicide of one of her full brothers,

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<sup>1</sup> For the elaboration of this section on Virginia Woolf’s life I have used Ortolano (2010), Gutiérrez López (2000), Del Prado Cerchar (2009) and Brooks (2012).

named Thoby, caused the writer a series of mental collapses which will remain through her entire life. The suffering she had to support was accompanied by several attempts of killing herself, jumping out of the window the first time.

After the death of her father in 1904, she changed her residence to Bloomsbury along with her full brothers and her sister Vanessa, a painter who married another artist. It was probably one of the best periods of her life since she met a great number of artists and intellectuals, with whom she created an association named the “Bloomsbury Group”, where she enjoyed talking and debating at all times about two of her favorite themes: politics and art. This experience helped her in an important way to broaden her literary knowledge; and this same year, she started writing in some magazines and newspapers. Additionally, she was betrothed to Lytton Strachey, but they did not marry because of his homosexual preferences. Despite of her first marital failure, she met an English political theorist, author, and publisher named Leonard Sidney Woolf thanks to a common friend.

By 1912, and despite of the fact that she was also a female homosexual, they finally married on August 10, spending the wedding night at Asheham house, their rented house located in East Sussex; and since the wedding, Virginia adopted the surname of her husband, becoming Adeline Virginia Woolf instead of Adeline Virginia Stephen. Their honeymoon consisted on a travel around some countries, such as France, Spain, and Italy, among others. And it was during this time when Leonard discovered the disapproval his wife felt against sex, an important fact that they both related with the sexual abuses she suffered when she was only a teenager, and which became an essential topic within her writings.

In view of the fact that Virginia, as well as Leonard, was closely related with literature and letters in general, they agreed to earn their life by making reports in newspapers and publishing their own compositions. Among the obvious advantages this marriage provided Leonard (happiness, and stability), one of the most remarkable one was probably his enormous worry about the mental sanity of his wife, arranging five years later his own publishing company at Hogarth House in Richmond (the place chosen by the couple as their new residence) in order to procure, among other things, a practical support to the weak mental health of his spouse. Unquestionably, the sufferings she had to support during most of her life did not only condition her general life, but also her writings, having to postpone the publication of some of her writings for years. One example was her first novel called *The Voyage Out*, whose publication was in 1952, though it was finished two years before because of another of her mental breakdowns.

By the time she was 32 years old, she had suffered more than four breakdowns as well as several attempts of committing suicide. She felt that she could not fight anymore against her sufferings; that is why she left the house she was sharing with her husband and wrote him a letter which said at first that she heard voices and she was completely unable of concentrating on her works. Afterwards, she also said that although she had fought against it during most of her life, she could not fight any more. And in the end of this letter she recognized and was really pleased to her husband because he had helped her a lot. Afterwards, Virginia decided to go to the River Ouse (situated not far away from her living town in Sussex) filled her pockets with weighty stones, and drowned herself in it on 28 March 1941, when she was only 59 years old.

## 2.2 Virginia Woolf as a writer

Looking at her beginnings as a writer, it must be taken into account the specific environment in which she grew up, which influenced in a great way the passion this author felt towards literature. Most of the people with whom she lived during her childhood as well as in her youth (including obviously her parents) were men of letters, artists, and intellectuals. Being a girl in that time meant, among other things, that she could not have the right of learning at school and much less at University, so the only ways she had to gain information about the most important themes of life were both through her father (who educated Virginia at home using his library) and her magnificent interest in reading the books of nearly all subject matters, since she was a passionate reader (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 10).

Since the age of 15, she spent the majority of her time focusing on her acquaintance and improvement of her literary abilities (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 10). However, it can be considered that her professional career as an author had its starting point with a personal diary she began to write almost once a week when she was only 9 years old. The first notes she wrote down on it were basically memories of familiar events, and her daily experiences she wanted to remember. Apart from being the first tool she possessed as a composer, and besides the usage she made of it (being one of her most remarkable hobbies), it seems that this instrument had a deep importance for her since she wrote in it until several days before killing herself (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 10).

Within this diary, a great amount of declarations she made about her compositions have been found. On the one hand, she talked about the characters that appeared in her works, establishing that they represented her own feelings and experiences, as well as the ones of the persons of her surroundings; or in other words, her characters played an important role within the autobiographical field. A good example of this is the tensions some of her characters experimented (such as Clarissa in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*) between the desires of living and dying, a subject matter that she frequently included in her writings as a recurrent topic (Ortolano, 2010: 77). And on the other hand, she also claimed that, as most of the modernist writers did, she wanted to criticize, through her work, those things she disliked about the time in which she lived, such as its social system.

In general, Virginia Woolf possesses a lot of qualities and abilities as a writer to portrait through her works the real life and feelings people of her generation lived. For this reason, it will be almost impossible to make an overall study of this modernist female author analyzing all these feelings in a deep manner. Being a really sensible human being, she also gives the reader the chance of perceiving and analyzing those techniques she used during all her literary life, and which, even nowadays, characterize her. Speaking on a broad way, it can be said that Virginia focused herself on portraying both the objective and subjective reality by using the feelings, thoughts, and actions her characters carried out in almost all her novels and lacking, sometimes, a logical or chronological line, which is important in the field of subjectivity. But which supposes an important difficulty to the reader in the complete understanding and comprehension of the composition because of its lack of unity and cohesion (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 11).

With these techniques, she was capable of finding a way in which she could express her own perceptions of the realities she was living, as well as the difficulties the human beings have to face in this specific reality (Benjamin, 1965: 214). It has been generally said that she succeeded on representing important topics such as death and the alienation of the individuals among the society in a realistic way and using her characteristic multi perspectivism. Virginia Woolf was always conscious about the difficulties an artist, or in her case a writer, has to face in the compositions, and she always stated that one of the most important problems the author has to deal with is to find a good plot which catches the attention of the reader (Jackson, 1998: 113). One peculiar aspect of this writer is that she was against any kind of formality in the compositions, which was an important characteristic during her times, and she supported the experimental style of writing, refusing the closed endings (Jackson, 1994:121) and being in favor of demonstrating the talent modernist authors had in order to represent the psychology of a person with a trauma (deMeester, 1998). In any case, her books received very good criticisms in general although she was an experimental writer and she did not have a great number of readers.

Dealing with the interest she had during her whole life, it can be said that Virginia Woolf was contrary to almost all things of her generation and the specific society she belonged to, and probably one of her most important dislikes was the Victorian ideology. Although her parents supported Victorianism, she considered it an unrealistic and a hypocritical way of living. As it is well – known, the role women played within the society was really relegated at home taking care of their children and without any possibility of studying. Of course, she was in complete disagreement with this; that is why Virginia constantly expressed the necessity women had to learn and improve their knowledge in order to create a female language and literature, as well as the equality between both sexes (Schüller, 2005: 2). Additionally, she was against the characteristic realism of her time, but in this case, she was not alone; she always felt supported by the “Bloomsbury Group” (Gutiérrez López, 2000:3).

All in all, the interests of Virginia Woolf were developed and built in an entire world of worries and preoccupations which started being related to the literature at first, and then to political ideologies, individuals, and the diversity of different feelings of alienation people suffered during Modernism (Gutiérrez López, 2000: 4). Despite of her mental illness and all the sufferings Virginia had to pass through her whole life, as well as the rejection she always felt against Victorianism and the ideologies her family supported, there is no doubt that she has been considered, according to many scholars, as the big mother of Modernism becoming, as time goes by, an essential influence for writers who belonged to different periods (Gutiérrez López, 2000: 1).

As mentioned before, she started writing in her daily diary after the death of her father; and although at first she only made contributions in some magazines and newspapers, she continued composing other works, such as novels, essays, and diaries, among others. She also became a remarkable influence to other writers because of the role she played among the women within the society and her beliefs on those who were perfectly able to change the world. During her entire life, this author made a constant defense of women (a theme that she included in some of her writings, such as *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, among others (García Fuster, 2010: 211), and the necessity of them to have the same right as men in the education field. Despite the fact that she could not go to school, and much less to University, she considered

herself a privileged one because of the fact that she came from a 'rich' family with enough resources to give her the opportunity to learn how to read and even write. She also claimed that without the right of receiving a good education, the talent women possessed will be lost and they will remain relegated at home forever. The necessity of the history revision constitutes one of the greatest worries Virginia Woolf had, becoming one of the first writers who demanded it. This theme was included also in her novel called *A Room of One's Own*, which defines the status of women through history in order to convince the twentieth century females of the huge importance this topic had.

### 3. MRS. DALLOWAY

#### 3.1 Introduction

*Mrs. Dalloway*, a modernist novel written in 1925 and broadly accepted as one of the most important and representative compositions within the English literature of the 20th century (Schüller, 2005: 2), deals with some controversial themes, such as awareness, isolation, and frustration in life, among others. It can be said that *Mrs. Dalloway* is a considerable literary accomplishment due to the specific narrative style this author employed in her novel, which has been considered, as mentioned before, an attempt to portrait her rejection against the 'false' structure that, according to her, characterized the Victorian fiction, or in other words, a judgmental portrait of her society ("Narrative Voice in Mrs. Dalloway." [marnielangeroodiblog.wordpress.com](http://marnielangeroodiblog.wordpress.com)).

Over time, it has been taken as truth that this is a clearly experimental composition, in which she succeed on finding the correct way of representing her personal perspective of the reality and of portraying the difficulties a person has to deal with during his/her life living this specific reality (Hemerique Pereira, 2009: 2). *Mrs. Dalloway* has been considered as a really difficult work to understand and follow by readers since it is neither a narration, nor a sketch of the characters. Since in this case Virginia Woolf focuses on analyzing several elements of the composition instead of just narrating a story line; or in other words, characters, psychological states, and sounds, but not studying the plot at all.

Without any doubt, the author confined herself perfectly to one of the most remarkable singularities of the modernist style of the compositions: multi perspectivism and lack of one single truth which can be appreciated observing how this writing was built up through the consciousness of the different characters which appear on it, instead of using one single narrator, making any reader to get his/her own and personal opinion ("Narrative Voice in Mrs. Dalloway." [marnielangeroodiblog.wordpress.com](http://marnielangeroodiblog.wordpress.com)). It is possible to think that Virginia based her novel on this technique following the main aim of her writings: to represent the complexity of the nature of human beings ("Narrative Voice in Mrs. Dalloway." [marnielangeroodiblog.wordpress.com](http://marnielangeroodiblog.wordpress.com)).

Another remarkable characteristic Virginia incorporated to her novels was the tremendous relevance she always gave to the personal reflections of each character, and paying less attention to the dialogues maintained among them, whose result is giving more importance to what is not said, a feature she shares with one of the best American writers: William Faulkner. One example that can be taken from *Mrs. Dalloway* is the incapacity Richard Dalloway has to tell Clarissa that he loves her:

"But he wanted to come in holding something. Flowers? Yes, flowers (...) The time comes when it can't be said; one's too shy to say it (...) 'I love you' (...) Here he was walking across London to say Clarissa in so many words that he loved her. Which one never does say, he thought" (Woolf, 1992: 150)

During the 20th century, people read novels in order to find meaning to their lives. This searching for meaning was crucial and in order to accomplish what people was demanding

at that time (novels in which they could feel any identification with the characters), authors incorporated these social worries and interests people had to their compositions. In this novel, it can be appreciated how Virginia Woolf made this choice with the main character of the story: an upper class woman named Clarissa Dalloway. This figure discloses (step by step) the attempts she carried out through a part of her life; not her whole lifetime because, although the novel incorporates a lot of references to the past and the author used the technique of the flashback as well as time as something subjective, it only narrates one single day (Benjamin, 1965: 214). In addition, another important idea she added to her work was the idea of deconstruction, or in other words, the emphasis on looking for the organic view of things.

The principal narrative aim of this author was to express, through words, the nature of the human consciousness. All her novels are based on easy plots; the most important thing for her was not to tell a story, but the exposition she

accomplished of the characters and their past. That is why she introduced an innovative technique which consists of moving through the different perspectives within the mind of the characters and in this way, represent them from their own impressions, thoughts, and feelings (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 12). As mentioned before, this kind of experimentation with time, as well as the inner dialogue of the characters of the story are important elements that finally contribute to the building up of the literary architecture in which this exposition of the human consciousness is made possible within the narrative technique of Virginia Woolf (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 16).

### 3.2 Plot

The Modernist composition of *Mrs. Dalloway* is focused on one single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway (an upper class woman) as well as the preparations she carried out for a society party she will hold that same night (Hemerique Pereira, 2009:2). As it has been said before, it is narrated by presenting different events and facts of both her life and the one of the characters of the story through her memories and past events, but also, with the feelings and thoughts of the characters' consciousness (Hemerique Pereira, 2009:2).

As mentioned before, this novel has been considered, over time, as one of the most complex and remarkable compositions of the modernist period. However, it can be said that this work does not have a real plot; but a sequence of past and present events of its characters narrated through the technique of the stream of consciousness. That is to say, telling these events through the mind of the figures which appear within it.

### 3.3 Virginia Woolf and *Mrs. Dalloway*

Without any doubt, this final part of the essay is the most important one since it contains an explanation about the main themes or elements which can be found in the novel, in addition to the close relationship they all (as well as the characters) share with Virginia Woolf. This author was so complicated and had such a great amount of things to comment and analyze that it is difficult to make a distinction among them establishing which ones are more relevant (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 16). So, as this work deals with the personal implication Virginia Woolf experimented with *Mrs. Dalloway*, I will provide below those autobiographical aspects which the most important figures of this novel share with the author.

#### 3.3.1 Principal topics of *Mrs. Dalloway*

As it has been generally spoken, within the most representative features of this period was the idea of fragmentation; i.e., the belief that the world had been broken and did not have any sense neither at the beginning nor at the end. Looking at the literature, writers had two different possibilities. On the one hand, they could focus themselves on just one of these fragments in their attempt to understand, at least, one single part of this world; and on the other hand, they could represent this chaotic world generally linked to Modernism by representing all these little fragments and making the reader to get confused, as William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf decided to make.

At the beginning of her biography, I have explained that the whole life she lived was really complicated and intense, full of unforgettable experiences she had to face. And probably, this is the main cause of her choice of representing this chaotic world. The way in which Virginia decided to represent this chaos was through the narration technique of the novel, which is known as stream of consciousness, which means the narration or interpretation of the events and facts of the writing through the character's mind, and thus, the absence of one single narrator or one single reality (multi perspectivism). Although there are some references or clues the writer provided to the reader in order to clarify a little bit who was the character who was speaking, it is almost impossible to understand it completely and not getting lost in some parts. We can take as an example the moment when the character of Lucrezia appears (since at first there is no clue about who she is: "Let us go on, Septimus', said his wife (...) But Lucrezia herself could not help looking at the motor car and the tree pattern on the blinds" (Woolf, 1992: 19).

As well as the particular way in which the character of Septimus reacts the moment when he hears the noise produced by the motor car; because as we do not know nothing of him at the beginning it is confusing: "(...) and this gradual drawing together of everything to one center before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface (...) terrified him. (Woolf, 1992: 18). Within the next page, there appear more details about the strange behavior carried out by Septimus towards his wife Lucrezia: "But her husband, for they had been married four, five years now, jumped, started, and said, 'All right'! angrily, as if she had interrupted him" (Woolf,1992: 19).

Another element which contributes to transmit this chaos to the reader was the manipulation she made of time (as mentioned before, it constitutes one of the most characteristic features of this author). It can be appreciated if we look at the presentation of each character, which is made through the narration of some event which does not follow a chronological order and is portrayed through the mind of each of the figures that appear in the story. For instance: at the very beginning, Virginia focuses the attention of the reader on Clarissa and the present moment when she buys flowers for the party. But suddenly, the character of Peter Walsh appears alternating present and past (Del Prado Cerchar, 2009: 12). Another example is when Clarissa remembers the time when she is told that he is married with an Indian girl: “and then the horror of the moment when someone told her at a concert that he had married a woman met on the boat going to India! Never should she forget all that (Woolf, 1992: 9). As it is well known, Virginia Woolf opposed Victorianism and the rules of its society; and exactly because of this she avoided any traditional way of structuring the novel and it is portrayed according to her particular way of perceiving the time (Benjamin, 1965: 214).

This Modernist composition does not follow either a chronological order, or a logical one, but the general plot is presented by the alternation of the past and present events of the main characters depending on their importance (Benjamin, 1965: 214) by using flashback and their remembrances. Dealing with the themes of this composition, the great amount of them are closely related to her period of time. Frustration in life, as well as the feelings of isolation among the society and the incapacity of progressing are a clear reflection of the personality of Virginia, since these are the common feelings she probably suffered during her whole life. And the fact that she could not attend school and much less University because she was a woman, as well as her great implication within the feminist society demanding this right women should have, are clear examples of this.

As during her whole life the idea of death was always really present within her family and her friends, and even in her mind (since she suffered from mental illness and had wishes of committing suicide) it seems probable that, in order to reflect in a way her experiences and make this novel autobiographical somehow, she incorporated this topic by the hand of one of the main characters: Septimus, who will be explained below in more detail. Both the importance of the social rank, and the impossibility of communication among the individuals is another important topic Virginia included in her composition based, mainly, in the importance it supposed within the Victorian society, and what meant, particularly for women, to belong to higher classes (as it was her case). As I will show afterwards, Clarissa (the protagonist of the novel) was not a happy person, and felt full of social requirements and really dependent of her husband (Richard), since she belonged to that social position thanks to their marriage: “(...) this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (Woolf, 1992: 13).

The last topic included in this essay is the homosexuality and the sexual repression suffered by three of the main characters of the novel: Clarissa, Peter, and Sally. As it has been pointed out over time, homosexual feelings in western culture have been often linked with the feelings of alienation and loneliness, which has been pointed out in many studies of *Mrs. Dalloway* (Meyer, 2000:213). As it happens nowadays, those individuals who felt any kind of attraction towards people of their own sex were usually afraid of being contrary to the rules established by religion and society in general (Meyer, 2000:205). This fact is another autobiographical aspect Virginia Woolf wanted to include in the novel since the first attempt she had of marrying was a failed because of the homosexual tendency of her first suitor.

### 3.3.2 Characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*

*Mrs. Dalloway* can be taken as a spiritual autobiography in which the dilemma felt by the protagonist between the desires of living and her wishes of being dead are shown in a literary way through the creation of two characters (Clarissa and Septimus) who reflect both sides of her mental illness (Ortolano, 2010: 77). Together with her personal diary, the notes her husband wrote down about the illness of Virginia are crucial in order to get a better understanding of the novel. Taking them into account, it can be said that probably, she canalized all visions she suffered for elaborating both the frame and the personalities of the characters (Ortolano, 2010: 77). It can be taken as truth that madness could be understood, in this specific case, as an intensification or distortion of the way of perceiving Virginia had as the normal one. And a clear example of all this is the character of Septimus, who is not able to differentiate between fiction (mental visions) and reality as it can be seen when he thinks that he is unable of expressing any kind of feeling and spite of be worried about that, he prefers reading Shakespeare and compare the vision he has about the world with the one of Shakespeare (Woolf, 1992: 114-115). On the contrary, Clarissa is capable enough of distinguishing between those facts, or as Modernists would say, between those ‘worlds’ (Ortolano, 2010: 77).

Focusing on the first character, Clarissa Dalloway, it must be clear that she is the most important figure of this composition, and the rest of them are linked to her in some way or another (“Mrs. Dalloway.” jiffynotes.com). One peculiar aspect of her is that she is not a new creation, but had already appeared in the first novel of Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out*, as a member of the Parliament. This author was so dedicated to her, that she decided to compose another work, focusing her attention on her personality and portraying some of her relevant interests, as she stated in her diary: “I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity”. [...] “I want to criticize the social system, and show it at work, at its most intense.” (“Mrs. Dalloway.” jiffynotes.com). Clarissa was not a particularly beautiful and clever woman she knew almost nothing, as Virginia Woolf tells at the beginning of the novel: “She knew nothing; no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now, except memories in bed (...)” (Woolf, 1992: 10). However, her good presence and manners permitted her to catch the attention of the people everywhere. She can be considered as an enthusiastic woman, but with some depressed and jealous moments which provoked in her those feelings of isolation and solitude:

“Oh if she could have had her life over again! (...) She would have been, in the first place, dark like Lady Bexborough (...) Instead of which she had (...) She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now (...)” (Woolf, 1992: 12-13)

(the same Virginia suffered), and what is more, a sense of frustration because of her failed marriage with Richard since she had many doubts about her marriage and if being with Richard was the correct choice for her:

“so she would still find herself (...) still making out that she had been right – and she had too – not to marry him. For in a marriage a little license, 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” (Woolf, 1992: 9)

As some scholars, such as Michael J. Meyer, have said what has more importance within the whole novel is this negative part, which depicts the normal isolated individual within the society (Meyer, 2000: 212).

Despite the fact that it could be considered irrelevant, both the female sexuality and the sexual desires Clarissa expresses within the novel (Meyer, 2000: 215), the fact is that, at least the character of Sally Seton, is presented to the reader as one of her sexual debilities:

“(...) this falling in love with Sally Seton; her relation in the old days with Sally Seton (...) all that evening she could not take her eyes off Sally. It was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired (...) the strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one’s feeling for a man. It was completely disinterested” (Woolf, 1992: 41-42-43)

And is in this part when Virginia explains that Clarissa is sexually repressed (Meyer, 2000: 214).

The sexual attraction she felt to Sally, as well as the doubts she had about the future she could have lived with Peter Walsh, are responsible for the love and sexual problems she has; and instead of looking for her happiness and listening to her heart, she adopts a more comfortable and easy way of living marrying Richard, thanks to whom she has a good social position (“Mrs. Dalloway”, jiffynotes.com). The similitudes with the author are obvious, since Virginia felt a sexual attraction to women although she finally married Leonard, who, as well as Richard, provided her certain stability and took care of her.

Clarissa represents the common feelings of frustration among the people of her own generation; that is why death is always present in this character. She even wishes it, but she

finally did not fulfill it (unlike Septimus), which is a remarkable difference with the author who killed herself at the age of 59. Taking into account the given external appearance of Clarissa, it would be quite incredible for the rest of the characters a suicide of this figure because of the fact that she always was worried about her exterior presence and kept the proper manners of a lady, although she was completely unhappy in most of the aspects of her life. All in all, there is no doubt that the symptoms suffered by Virginia evidenced a manic-depressive disease; that is why she experimented radical changes about her desires of living and her enthusiasm on the one hand, and her wishes of being dead on the other. The same as Clarissa Dalloway: her excitement because of the preparations of the party, and the feelings of frustration for her whole life (Ortolano, 2010: 77).

The other character which best reflects the personality of the author is Septimus Warren Smith. Virginia Woolf created this character in order to unearth a really ingenious element able to represent what was wrong with her (Meyer, 2000: 212). Through him, she pretended to portrait not only those mental afflictions suffered by patients of severe injuries (the



consequences of the war in this case), but additionally, the necessity they felt to find meaning for those sufferings and recuperate themselves from the penuries. Analyzing the figure of Septimus, it can be said that his tragic ending (his suicide) was the consequence of his inability to feel and transmit his own experiences to others and thus, to find any meaning for them (deMeester, 1998).

Similarly to Clarissa, the previous events of his life are told really briefly, probably because of an attempt of Virginia to represent only those sad feelings proper of Modernism (frustration, sadness, impossibility of changing the world, lack of communication, etc.) which have been mentioned before. However, it is known that he was a young poet obsessed with Shakespeare, who moved to London (the city where this novel is placed and where he found his first love), and who saw how the arrival of the war finished with his good position in an office. This idea of representing only the negative facts of his life is really connected to the chaos provoked by the First World War during this artistic movement, since it was from here that Septimus became ill and despite of his youth started with his nightmares, visions, and paranoias (Benjamin, 1965: 221).

From my point of view, what was more difficult for Septimus was not only his participation in the war and all the experiences he lived there, but also all the difficulties he found by the time he tried to reintegrate himself to the society. So probably, in order to get a better understanding of this character, it is necessary to know both the consequences of having a trauma, and the process of rehabilitation (deMeester, 1998). The theme of homosexuality is also presented in his personal story as well as in the character of Clarissa and, above all, Virginia Woolf. While Septimus felt a tremendous culpability for not regretting enough the death of his friend Evans, whose ghost persecutes him everywhere, the reality of this guilt is his impossibility of recognizing that he is completely in love with him and that he has evaded this passion through a marriage without love (Ortolano, 2010: 77).

Septimus decided to get married with Lucrezia not because he fell in love with her, but because of his desire to avoid the panic and his isolation, and also for the same reason that Clarissa married Richard and Virginia Woolf married Leonard: to achieve some kind of stability, serenity, and to acquire a good social position among this society. As Clarissa, and probably Virginia, he had to keep his feelings to himself and does not to tell anything to anybody (Meyer, 2000: 210). Therefore, we can establish a comparison between the real causes which provoked the shock in the character of Septimus, which are the war experiences, the failure in his integration among the society, and his impossible love with Evans, and the ones which caused the shock of the author: the marriage with Leonard Woolf in addition to her problematic life (Meyer, 2000: 212).

Another important aspect in the personality of Septimus is his profound disillusion with society (for which he fought during the First World War) and with the falling of the British Empire, this is represented somehow with this 'chaos' associated with the idea of the fragmentation which had a great importance for Virginia Woolf. As mentioned before, the principal reason for Septimus to commit suicide is her inability to reinsert himself within the society after the war and his incapability for communicating with the others. It is important the way in which he killed himself since it was by jumping out of the window, the first manner in which Virginia tried to do it herself (Ortolano, 2010: 77). Then, it can be said that Virginia, in the creating process of this character, based herself on her mind, and on the critical moments of her breakdowns. The idea of the suicide was present in this character as well as in the one of Clarissa, and even in Virginia Woolf herself "I will kill myself" (Woolf, 1992:19). It can be considered that Septimus is the dark face of the character of Mrs. Dalloway and fulfilled the suicide Clarissa fantasized with but she did not dare to achieve (Ortolano, 2010: 77).

As mentioned before and according to many scholars and experts, the personality of Virginia Woolf, or at least those aspects she wanted to emphasize over the others, is portrayed through the creation of the two main important characters: Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway, and Septimus Warren Smith. But it does not seem that they are similar; in fact, they are a clear object of comparison: while the first one is a woman who belongs to the higher social rank with all the facilities she can ever imagine but completely unhappy, Septimus is a young poet and war veteran who becomes completely mad and who finally commits suicide ("Narrative Voice in *Mrs. Dalloway*." <http://marnielangeroodiblog.wordpress.com>). The place in which this story is located, London, as well as the historical context in which this story took place (post war) is the same for both characters.

There is no doubt that both of them are sexually repressed, and the pressure they suffered because of keeping it a secret is probably one of the consequences of their sentiments of alienation, frustration, depression, and the deep loneliness they felt even within their families (Meyer, 2000: 206). On the one hand, Clarissa Dalloway desired Sally Seton, and had also many doubts about how it would have been her marriage with Peter Walsh. And on the other hand,

Septimus was in love with her dead friend Evans, although he did not know it: "(...) the great revelation took place. A voice spoke from behind the screen. Evans was speaking. The dead were with him. 'Evans, Evans!', he cried" (Woolf, 1992: 121).

One of the differences between these two characters is the generational difference: while Septimus is completely destroyed because of his participation in the war, the contemporaries of Clarissa Dalloway, too old to fight, felt a huge guilt for sending the young males to fight, and in a way, exterminate them.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude the last part of this essay providing, on the one hand, a brief summary about both what I consider is the most important part of this work (the psychological and personal aspects Virginia Woolf decided to incorporate within her famous Modernist composition called *Mrs. Dalloway*), additionally to the Modernist characteristics of Virginia Woolf and the novel. And on the other hand, my personal reflection about the reasons she may have had to reflect herself in a masculine character (Septimus) instead of a female one.

As mentioned before, it has been taken for granted that this author could be taken as the master of all Modernist authors; and not only that, she has supposed a great influence to other authors such as, for instance, the recently deceased Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez ("Escritores latinoamericanos, ¿Falso o Verdadero?." <https://es.answers.yahoo.com>). That is why Virginia can be used as a reference to get a good understanding about both this period and its characteristics. To start with, it can be said that one of its most important goals was the search for beauty in all the compositions in order to react against another important movement known as Victorianism. One of the consequences of this search towards the esthetic aspect of things in compositions is the usage of a more elevated and cultivated vocabulary, which made those creations really difficult to understand for most of people and accessible only for a few ("Características del Modernismo." [sites.google.com](https://sites.google.com)).

Additionally, Modernist authors wanted to innovate in their works. Not only in the themes, but also in the way those writings were narrated. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a clear example of this because of both the themes in which she based this composition (frustration, alienation among the individuals, loneliness, suicide, importance of the social rank), and the narration technique she used: stream of consciousness, and the lack of one single narrator, among others. Subjectivity is also an important feature which is closely related to Modernism and thus, Virginia Woolf, since she did not use only one narrator, but the characters are the responsible for narrating the events of the novel through their own mind. It is also important the order in which all elements are told in this novel since it is a constant alternation between the present and the past. Or in other words, this work reflects the way in which the author understood time and does not follow a chronological or logical order. Virginia was also interested in representing the search for meaning that characterized her generation through the main characters of her writing: Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus. By her time, most of people lived in a deep internal crisis produced by all the changes explained before they had to support, and persons read novels in order to find it within them.

It can be taken as truth that Virginia Woolf succeed on making this composition an autobiographical one since she based this novel on the elements or aspects that she believed could represent her in a realistic way. From my point of view, among the great amount of aspects which are clearly representative of this author, the sexual repression she suffered during most of his life was very close to the one Clarissa Dalloway had towards the character of Sally and Septimus towards the figure of Evans, in addition to the deep feelings of sadness, depression and euphoria Virginia Woolf experimented in her life (which were almost the same that those lived by the figure of Septimus). Also, the feelings of alienation suffered by both Clarissa and Septimus were also really representative of Virginia since those were the sentiments she had during the major part of her life. And finally, the common idea these three figures had about marriage: the way of achieving stability, and comfort in life since as Virginia found a huge care as well as the protection by her husband Leonard, Mrs. Dalloway found it in addition to a good social position, and Septimus found Lucrezia, the one who will be always with him, avoiding being alone.

As it has been previously explained, the life of this author was really complicated from the beginning due to the death of several members of her family, which, along with the sexual abuses she suffered during her youth, provoked in her person a mental disease that, despite of the efforts carried out by her husband to treat her, occupied a great deal of her life. If we look at the extraordinary similitudes she established among herself and the main figures of her work, one question arises: why did she decide to portrait herself more realistically in the figure of Septimus than in the one of Clarissa Dalloway if she was a woman too? Taking for granted that there is not one single response, I consider that due to

the fact that she grew up in a Victorian society in which women were completely relegated at home taking care of children, and the social position they occupied was the one of their husbands (as is the case of Clarissa), she probably decided to focus on Septimus to give more credibility to the novel. Another possible explanation may be that as women, during that time, were portrayed as ladies and Virginia did not consider herself one of them probably because of her mental illness, she was more comfortable in the appearance of a man.

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