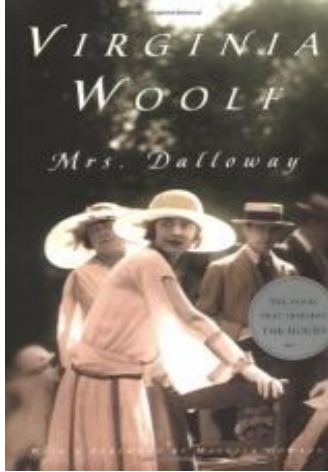


# Mrs. Dalloway

by Virginia Woolf

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## About the Book

Heralded as Virginia Woolf's greatest novel, this is a vivid portrait of a single day in a woman's life. When we meet her, Mrs. Clarissa Dalloway is preoccupied with the last-minute details of party preparation while in her mind she is something much more than a perfect society hostess. As she readies her house, she is flooded with remembrances of faraway times. And, met with the realities of the present, Clarissa reexamines the choices that brought her there, hesitantly looking ahead to the unfamiliar work of growing old.

## Discussion Guide

1. In *Mrs. Dalloway* Virginia Woolf combines interior with omniscient descriptions of character and scene. How does the author handle the transition between the interior and the exterior? Which characters' points of view are primary to the novel; which minor characters are given their own points of view? Why, and how does Woolf handle the transitions from one point of view to another? How do the shifting points of view, together with that of the author, combine to create a portrait of Clarissa and her milieu? Does this kind of novelistic portraiture resonate with other artistic movement's of Woolf's time?
2. Woolf saw Septimus Warren Smith as an essential counterpoint to Clarissa Dalloway. What specific comparisons and contrasts are drawn between the two? What primary images are associated, respectively, with Clarissa and with Septimus? What is the significance of Septimus making his first appearance as Clarissa, from her florist's window, watches the mysterious motor car in Bond Street?
3. What was Clarissa's relationship with Sally Seton? What is the significance of Sally's reentry into Clarissa's life after so much time? What role does Sally play in Clarissa's past and in her present?
4. What is Woolf's purpose in creating a range of female characters of various ages and social classes—from Clarissa

herself and Lady Millicent Burton to Sally Seton, Doris Kilman, Lucrezia Smith, and Maisie Johnson? Does she present a comparable range of male characters?

**5.** Clarissa's movements through London, along with the comings and goings of other characters, are given in some geographic detail. Do the patterns of movement and the characters' intersecting routes establish a pattern? If so, how do those physical patterns reflect important internal patterns of thought, memory, feelings, and attitudes? What is the view of London that we come away with?

**6.** As the day and the novel proceed, the hours and half hours are sounded by a variety of clocks (for instance, Big Ben strikes noon at the novel's exact midpoint). What is the effect of the time being constantly announced on the novel's structure and on our sense of the pace of the characters' lives? What hours in association with which events are explicitly sounded? Why? Is there significance in Big Ben being the chief announcer of time?

**7.** Woolf shifts scenes between past and present, primarily through Clarissa's, Septimus's, and others' memories. Does this device successfully establish the importance of the past as a shaping influence on and an informing component of the present? Which characters promote this idea? Does Woolf seem to believe this holds true for individuals as it does for society as a whole?

**8.** Threats of disorder and death recur throughout the novel, culminating in Septimus's suicide and repeating later in Sir William Bradshaw's report of that suicide at Clarissa's party. When do thoughts or images of disorder and death appear in the novel, and in connection with which characters? What are those characters' attitudes concerning death?

**9.** Clarissa and others have a heightened sense of the "splendid achievement" and continuity of English history, culture, and tradition. How do Clarissa and others respond to that history and culture? What specific elements of English history and culture are viewed as primary?

How does Clarissa's attitude, specifically, compare with Septimus's attitude on these points?

**10.** As he leaves Regent's Park, Peter sees and hears "a tall quivering shape,... a battered woman" singing of love and death: "the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth. . ." singing "the ancient song." What is Peter's reaction and what significance does the battered woman and her ancient song have for the novel as a whole?

**11.** Clarissa reads lines from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (IV, ii) from an open book in a shop window: "Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages. / Thou thy worldly task hast done, / Home art gone and ta'en thy wages: / Golden lads and girls all must, / As chimney-sweepers, come to dust." These lines are alluded to many times. What importance do they have for Clarissa, Septimus, and the novel's principal themes? What fears do Clarissa and other characters experience?

**12.** Why does Woolf end the novel with Clarissa as seen through Peter's eyes? Why does he experience feelings of "terror," "ecstasy," and "extraordinary excitement" in her presence? What is the significance of those feelings, and do we as readers share them?

## **Author Bio**

Adeline Virginia Woolf was an English writer and one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century.

During the interwar period, Woolf was a significant figure in London literary society and a central figure in the influential Bloomsbury Group of intellectuals. Her most famous works include the novels *MRS DALLOWAY* (1925), *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* (1927) and *ORLANDO* (1928), and the book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), with its famous dictum, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."

Woolf suffered from severe bouts of mental illness throughout her life, thought to have been the result of what is now termed bipolar disorder, and committed suicide by drowning in 1941 at the age of 59.

## Critical Praise

"Mrs. Dalloway was the first novel to split the atom. If the novel before Mrs. Dalloway aspired to immensities of scope and scale, to heroic journeys across vast landscapes, with Mrs. Dalloway Virginia Woolf insisted that it could also locate the enormous within the everyday; that a life of errands and party-giving was every bit as viable a subject as any life lived anywhere; and that should any human act in any novel seem unimportant, it has merely been inadequately observed. The novel as an art form has not been the same since. "Mrs. Dalloway also contains some of the most beautiful, complex, incisive and idiosyncratic sentences ever written in English, and that alone would be reason enough to read it. It is one of the most moving, revolutionary artworks of the twentieth century."

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