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ESSAY By Michael Cunningham

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## Michael Cunningham on Virginia Woolf's Literary Revolution



Virginia Woolf, 1902. Credit...George C. Beresford/Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" is a revolutionary novel of profound scope and depth, about a day in the life of a woman who runs a few errands, sees an old suitor and gives a dull party. It's a masterpiece created out of the humblest narrative materials.

Woolf was among the first writers to understand that there are no insignificant lives, only inadequate ways of looking at them. In “Mrs. Dalloway,” Woolf insists that a single, outwardly ordinary day in the life of a woman named Clarissa Dalloway, an outwardly rather ordinary person, contains just about everything one needs to know about human life, in more or less the way nearly every cell contains the entirety of an organism’s DNA.

With “Mrs. Dalloway,” Woolf asserted as well that we are all embarked on epic journeys of our own, even though, to the untrained eye, some of us, many of us, might look as if we’re only there to tidy up or to do our best to amuse our bosses.

Woolf knew that questions of scale are relative — that the movements of heavenly bodies seen through a telescope are not any more mysterious or revelatory than those of subatomic particles seen through a microscope. Each is an all but imponderable vastness. Each is in constant motion according to a series of apparently cogent, but by no means fully comprehensible, rules and principles. Only God, and a handful of mortals, understand that the differences between a proton and the planet Jupiter are negligible, if we eliminate the essentially irrelevant factor of mass.

But what, then, about “Mrs. Dalloway” itself? It’s one thing to maintain that Woolf created a profound and revolutionary novel out of a single day in the life of a relatively conventional person. It’s one thing to say that the book may have about as much to do with discovering the laws of human physics as it does with traditional narrative.

It’s another thing to ask ourselves: How, exactly, did she do that?

In “Mrs. Dalloway” we follow Clarissa, a society hostess, well-heeled and gracious, a little false, no longer young, as she walks through London on a balmy day in June. Like Clarissa herself, neither the day’s tasks nor the evening’s party is particularly auspicious. London, after all, produces 30 June days every year, and you could say that for Clarissa, the wife of a Conservative member of Parliament, giving parties is simply part of her job description.

Still. If in “Mrs. Dalloway” there’s no such thing as an insignificant person, there is, as well, no such thing as a usual day. Clarissa’s pleasant but seemingly unextraordinary day is nevertheless infused with “life; London; this moment of June.” One ignores the marvels of all three, in their lyrically descending order, at risk to one’s soul.

Yet “Mrs. Dalloway” is considerably more than a paean to the daily beauties. If it were strictly a celebration of life, however exquisitely written, we wouldn’t have this much use for it so many decades after it was published, in 1925. If “Mrs. Dalloway” is a swooningly gorgeous book, it is also a dark and disquieting one.

For one thing, “Mrs. Dalloway” is haunted by the restless ghosts of the living. There’s Peter Walsh, the man Clarissa might have married but didn’t; Sally Seton, the woman with whom she might have allowed herself to fall in love (but didn’t); and Septimus Warren Smith, a delusional, shellshocked veteran of World War I, who walks through

London on the same day, in the same general vicinity, as Clarissa, but whom Clarissa never actually meets.

Along with its most prominent characters, “Mrs. Dalloway” is almost as densely populated as a novel by Charles Dickens. In “Mrs. Dalloway”’s London, consciousness passes from one character to another in more or less the way a baton is passed among members of a relay race. If, for instance, a young Scottish woman, newly arrived in London, wanders lost and disconsolate through Regent’s Park, we briefly enter her mind, feel her unhappiness (“the stone basins, the prim flowers ... all seemed, after Edinburgh, so queer. ... She had left her people; they had warned her what would happen”) until she is noticed by an older woman, at which moment we switch to the consciousness of the old woman, who, envying the first woman’s youth, mourns the loss of her own (“it’s been a hard life. ... What hadn’t she given to it? Roses; figure; her feet too.”) until we are snapped back to Clarissa, as she returns home to learn she has not been invited to an exclusive, politically inspired luncheon.

Prominent among the novel’s wonders is Clarissa herself, a person more likely, in other novels, to appear as a trivial, foolish and peripheral character. Woolf’s Clarissa, however, although possessed of foolish and trivial aspects, is also capable of feeling this: “She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that. She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.”

The world of “Mrs. Dalloway” is not in any way a simple, or simplified, world. If, as Henry James put it, a writer is someone “on whom nothing is lost,” one might presume to add, in Woolf’s name, that a writer is also someone on whom *no one* is lost. All the people who appear in “Mrs. Dalloway,” however peripherally, are visiting the book from unwritten novels of their own, the tales of their trials and triumphs, even though, in “Mrs. Dalloway,” they may occupy less than a paragraph, may appear only as a discouraged man who contemplates saying a prayer at St. Paul’s Cathedral, or as an impoverished Irishwoman who speculates, gleefully, over which exalted personage occupies the royal motor car as it rumbles past her on a crowded street.

The book encompasses, as well, almost infinite shades and degrees of happiness, loss, satisfaction, regret and tragedy. It invokes, over and over, the choices we make, those that are made for us by others, and their sometimes lifelong ramifications, many of which we could not possibly have imagined at the time.

Would Clarissa’s life have been more fulfilling had she married Peter, a mercurial romantic, instead of the more solid, if rather unexciting, Richard Dalloway?

It seems safe to say that Clarissa’s life would have been markedly different if she’d pursued Sally beyond a single, covert, girlhood kiss, but would life as a same-sex couple in the 1920s have been a better life?

Whatever might pass for regret or nostalgia is rescued by Woolf's respect for the ambiguous and the unknowable. If a good-enough novel shows us where its characters went wrong, a great novel is more likely to eschew the very notion that anyone can be seen, with any degree of certainty, to have gone either "right" or "wrong." Under "Mrs. Dalloway"'s brilliantly crafted surface is a chaos of decisions made and not made, of the consequences of both, and of the uncountable parallel lives lived silently, invisibly, alongside our own.

And so we have Peter Walsh, still mooning over the Clarissa he lost, decades earlier. We have Richard Dalloway, mooning over the Clarissa he won but who evades him still, after many years of marriage. We find ourselves in a world in which the past is neither more nor less than a present that occurred in another time; a world in which it's all but impossible to distinguish the missed opportunity from the narrow escape.

Maybe the book's most singular innovation, however, is the alternating stories of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, who do not know of each other's existence until the very end, when Septimus arrives at Clarissa's party as a true ghost, not only disembodied but nameless, nothing left of him but his suffering and his violent end. At the very last moment, their lives converge, but only across the divide of mortality itself.

While Septimus is still alive, though, we move back and forth between the utter veracity of Clarissa's domain, which can run to the banal, and the tumultuous delusions of Septimus's, where a little banality might be a welcome relief.

Though seldom discussed as such, "Mrs. Dalloway" is one of the great novels of World War I. Woolf always intended it to be set in London just after the war — in an England that had lost hundreds of thousands of people; in a London in which, partly owing to new weapons like mustard gas and flamethrowers, the streets after Armistice were crowded with sons, husbands and fathers who'd returned from combat alive but so maimed as to be unrecognizable. Woolf was too squeamish (or respectful) to include such details, but I've always found it illuminating to remember that on the streets on which Clarissa walked, on which she greeted acquaintances and considered gloves in a shop window, there would have been men missing limbs, men with melted faces, making their way among those who'd gone out to shop or to promenade.

In an early draft, Woolf opened the book (then titled "The Hours") with Peter Walsh walking among the still-intact steeples and statues of central London as a troop of soldiers marched by to lay a memorial wreath in Trafalgar Square. Peter, musing on his own failures and frailties, thought of a woman he'd once loved, named Clarissa.

And, at that moment, a book titled "The Hours" became one called "Mrs. Dalloway." At that moment a book that had opened with the line "In Westminster, where temples, meeting houses, conventicles, & steeples of all kinds are congregated together, there is at all hours & halfhours, a round of bells, correcting each other, asseverating that time has come a little earlier, or stayed a little later, here or here," became a book that opened with the line "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."

“Mrs. Dalloway” would be a book about a London that had been changed forever, superimposed over a London determined to get back to business as usual, as quickly as possible. Clarissa would stand in for all those who still believed in flowers and parties; Septimus for those who’d been harmed beyond any powers of recovery. The novel would also mark the early period of a literary career that would change forever the ways in which novels are written, and read. It’s an intricately wrought portrait of a place and a moment, and a stunningly acute depiction of the multifarious experience of living a life, anywhere, at any time.

Michael Cunningham is the author of seven novels, including “The Hours,” for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. This is an excerpt adapted from his introduction to a new edition of “Mrs. Dalloway” that will be published by Vintage in January.