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Time and Love in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Wang Xiaoli

In many of Virginia Woolf's works, time is a very significant theme. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf also tells us about the importance of time to the characters. This story is told using the style of stream of consciousness. From the beginning to the end of this novel, the narrative moves back and forth between the past and the present following Clarissa Dalloway's mind, and it sometimes stops and branches out into some parts of her memory. Constantly contrasting the differences between the past and the present, Clarissa tries to reconcile herself to life, but it is very hard. For much of the novel she considers aging and death with anxiety, even as she performs life-affirming actions, such as buying flowers. J.Hillis Miller points out that people suffer from their past in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and he considers that the key of the novel is the repetition of the past in the present.¹

In the opening scene of the novel, when Clarissa Dalloway goes out to buy flowers for her party at evening, she recalls the time about thirty years ago. Clarissa was a lovely, charming, talkative and passionate girl when she was in her youth. She often picked flowers in the summer mornings and ran around on the lawn in the little town--Bourton. She looked very pretty during that beautiful summer when she spent together with Sally Seton, Peter Walsh, and Richard Dalloway. She was in love with each of them.

Clarissa remembers her love for Sally most vividly, as the narrator says: "[T]his question of love...falling in love with women...her relation in the old days with Sally Seton..." (37).² At first, Clarissa was attracted by the beauty of Sally: "It was an extraordinary beauty of the kind she most admired, dark, large - eyed..." (37). Then they became intimate very quickly. It was Sally who first told her about sex and

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social problems. They often talked about life, literature and so on, and danced the whole night. She was very happy when she stayed with Sally, and “Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was” (38). Woolf writes about Clarissa’s feelings for Sally: “The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally. It was not like one’s feeling for man. It was completely disinterested...” (38). In Clarissa’s life, the most unforgettable scene is the kiss with Sally on the terrace:

Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—"a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling! (40)

This scene is described profoundly, passionately, and it is the climax of Clarissa’s love stories. She felt it was a “present” from life and it was the high point of her life. “The others disappeared” means they loved completely, indifferent to other people. She even thought: “If it were now to die 'twere now to be most happy” (39).

Though they were very happy when they stayed together, marriage was an impossible thing for them. They felt “a presentiment of something that was bound to part them (they spoke of marriage always as a catastrophe)” (39). Although female homosexuality wasn’t criminalized then, love affairs between women were not accepted by people. Clarissa and Sally would not be always together. Furthermore, Sally could not accept Clarissa because she needed to marry for money. Clarissa and Sally’s love affair was like an illusion and disappeared quickly. At Clarissa’s party, to her surprise, Sally appears after their thirty years of separation. When they meet again, Clarissa can’t find her former affection for Sally. Sally also boasts to Clarissa and Peter about her rich husband and five big sons, and doesn’t show any passion like before.

Thirty years ago Peter loved Clarissa very much; he even wanted to marry her.
They often attended parties and danced together. In the eyes of others, they were an ordinary couple. But when Peter interrupted Clarissa and Sally's kiss, Clarissa felt "his hostility, his jealousy" (41), ending up with their quarrel. Although the period of their romance was not short, they were out of harmony:

They had always this queer power of communication without words. She knew directly he criticized her. Then she would do something quite obvious to defend herself, like this fuss with the dog—but it never took him in, he always saw through Clarissa. Not that he said anything, of course; just sat looking glum. It was the way their quarrels often began. (67)

Peter is the first lover of Clarissa among them. He is an immature, idle man. He loved Clarissa very much at first; He recognized that the effect of Clarissa on him was immeasurable. It was like a mystery that she had influenced him more than any person he had ever known. But Clarissa didn't choose him. Clarissa preferred to stay with Sally than with Peter. Sometimes she got the impression that he was like a little boy. Especially after she met the mature Richard Dalloway, she couldn't bear Peter's jealousy and narrow-mindedness. Clarissa thought their love was so fierce, so passionate that she couldn't accept it and Peter's future was uncertain, so she broke with him. After he was rejected by her, he left Bourton where they had spent happy times once, and went to India alone and married a girl on the boat going out to India.

To Peter, Clarissa's feeling is confused and complex. Although it is Clarissa who decided to leave Peter, she can't forget him and the days spent with him. In fact, she once loved him also, and even though: "He asked impossible things. He made terrible scenes. She would have accepted him still, perhaps, if he had been less absurd" (70). When Clarissa has heard his return, she is very excited: "So surprised she was to see him, so glad, so shy, so utterly taken aback to have Peter Walsh come to her unexpectedly in the morning! (She had not read his letter.)" (45). When they meet again at her home, Clarissa talks about many things that happened before: "'Do you remember,' she said, 'how the blinds used to flap at Bourton?"' (47). "'Do you remember the lake?' she said, in an abrupt voice, under the pressure of an emotion
which caught her heart, made the muscles of her throat stiff, and contracted her lips in a spasm as she said 'lake'” (48). Clarissa remembers the happy things as well as their quarrels clearly. When Peter sees her mending her dress, he feels Clarissa is changed by life and marriage. His passion can't get back to old days; and he only thinks she is an old woman: “I shan’t tell her anything about it, he thought, for she’s grown older” (45). After Peter tells her that he is in love, Clarissa knows clearly he doesn’t love her anymore; “But in her heart she felt, all the same, he is in love. He has that, she felt; he is in love….trembling a little. He was in love! Not with her. With some younger woman, of course” (50). Thirty years ago Peter loved her but now he loves another younger woman. It makes Clarissa believe that time is able to change Peter’s will.

Fulfilling Peter's presentiment, Clarissa got married to Richard Dalloway. Although Richard was “a fair young man, rather awkward” (68), she chose him. It is because he has power:

Dalloway rowed them in. He said nothing. But somehow as they watched him start, jumping on to his bicycle to ride twenty miles through the woods, wobbling off down the drive, waving his hand and disappearing, he obviously did feel, instinctively, tremendously, strong, all that; the night; the romance; Clarissa. He deserved to have her.” (70)

When the four went rowing with Richard, Clarissa, Sally and Peter were impressed by his grace. Woolf chooses “Deserve” intentionally. It underlines that Richard is better suited for Clarissa than Peter. She lives with Richard peacefully for almost thirty years of married life. There is no unforgettable kiss, as with Sally, and no fierce quarrel, as with Peter, between Clarissa and Richard.

To her husband, Richard, Clarissa is also paradoxical. Throughout these years, she can’t be happy entirely. She often thinks about old days and old lovers desolately. She doesn’t live in the same bedroom with her husband but lives in an attic, alone. We can feel her loneliness now and then. She even compares her former lovers and

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3 “it” means “she’s grown older” which is mentioned before.
her husband. Although she can't forget Peter and Sally, she doesn't wish to leave Richard. The reason for Clarissa's languishing day is the spiritual shock she received as a result of Lady Bruton not inviting her to a lunch party with Richard, and Richard only phoning to her maid. So she tells herself: "Fear no more," said Clarissa... she had stood shiver" (34). And she thinks: "No vulgar Jealousy could separate her from Richard" (34). At the end of her party, she observes the goodness of Richard: "It was due to Richard: she had never been so happy" (203). If we consider Clarissa's decision on marriage from a practical standpoint, her choice is correct because Richard has a good income against jobless Peter.

Clarissa once loved three people—Sally, Peter and Richard. Whom did she love truly and happily? Does she love someone now? Perhaps she can't give an affirmative answer. Clarissa who is an upper-class housewife lives in her past. She thinks over her love stories and looks for the answer to her decision about her marriage. Neither for Peter nor for Richard, does she have any desire, because the most unforgettable kiss is that which she had with Sally, a female friend of hers. Clarissa doesn't know by whom she is loved, and whom she loves. There is no true love for her now because she can't love any one of the three people strongly, calmly, and with ease. She might love the combination of them. Imagination and remembrance lead to her spiritual problem. Although she speculates, she may never find the answer till death.

Woolf seems to want to tell us that women thinking over their own experiences would sometimes feel there is nothing more confusing than love. Rachel Bowlby represents in her articles that Woolf tries to define woman's goal in life and seeks for the answer of what women are and what they might hope to be and do. She also mentions that Mrs. Dalloway, together with To the Lighthouse (1927) explores the relationship between individuals and the institutions of society.4

From a vivacious girl to a conventional housewife, Clarissa has changed very much. It seems like a big jump from the past to the day when she gives her party, but it necessarily forces us to consider the passing of time during the thirty years unconsciously. To Clarissa, it is like one day. She is living in the past, so she can't

accept the passing of time. The reality is she lives in an attic alone and feels very lonely. Many heroes or heroines in the novels by Woolf are lonely whether they like it or not. For example, in the biographical novel—Orlando (1928), she describes: "Orlando naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone". Woolf doesn’t say that Clarissa loves to live alone in that little room, otherwise we can feel her loneliness and unwillingness. According to John Graham’s opinion, the room in Jacob’s Room (1922) symbolises the selfhood formed in time. Also in this novel, from her small room Clarissa looks out and sees the most interesting mystery: people are in the same flow of time, each moving under the pressure of time - flow, visible to each other, unknown to each other and essentially alone.

The passing of time is the central concern of Woolf. In this novel, Woolf uses a lot of words to express the importance of time and her understanding of time. For example, she repeats many times the word “time” and even changes it into capital letter. She often selects "old" or "older" as adjective of woman to emphasize the passing of time. She depicts in Orlando: "Girls were roses, and their seasons were short as the flowers". Time imparts order to the fluid thoughts, memories, and encounters that make up Clarissa Dalloway. Big Ben is a hint of the significance of time all over the novel. It sounds out the hour continuously, ensuring that the passage of time, and the awareness of eventual death, is always obvious. John Graham considers that Big Ben symbolises the time-flow in Mrs. Dalloway.

Clarissa, Septimus, Peter, and other characters are in the grip of time, and as they age they evaluate how they have spent their lives. Clarissa, in particular, senses the passage of time, and the appearance of Sally and Peter, friends from her past emphasizes how much time has gone by since Clarissa was young. Clarissa sometimes wants the happiness of the past to continue, but she can’t reject the

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reality of the present. Once the hour chimes, however, the sound disappears—"leaden circles dissolved in the air". This expression recurs many times in the novel, indicating how ephemeral time is, despite the pomp of Big Ben and despite people's weary obsession with it.

Not only Clarissa but also other person in this novel can't face up to the passing of time. For example, Clarissa's lover, Peter, when he goes back from India on vacation, he is over fifty, and has to beg others to give him a job. Like Sally's wondering: "It must be lonely at his age to have no home, nowhere to go to"(208). When he reflects how quickly time passes, he doesn't want to acknowledge it and becomes terrified. After he leaves Clarissa's home, he sits on a chair in Regent's park and meditates about many things. But when he images Clarissa being dead and himself old, he becomes panic: "No! No! he cried. She is not dead! I am not old, he cried..." (56).

Another important woman represented in this novel is Lucrezia Warren Smith, who is Septimus's wife. Time is also the key to understanding this young couple. Septimus is a veteran. Before he went to the war, they lived peacefully. After Septimus comes home under the shell-shocked condition, she feels her life changed and doesn't like to face it. She says to herself: "It's wicked: why should I suffer?" (72) On one hand, it is because Septimus was shocked by the war and became almost mad, so they can't go back to their happy life which they spent before he entered the war. On the other hand, it is because of time; it seems that "time" separated them and made their love different. When they talk about time, Septimus becomes more disturbed:

'It is time,' said Rezia.
The word 'time' split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane, without his making them, hard, white, imperishable words, and flew to attach themselves to their places in an ode to Time; an immortal ode to Time. (78)

Then he even fancies his dead friend—Evans—appears. After that, Rezia tells him her true feeling directly: "But I am so unhappy, Septimus, 'said Rezia trying to
make him sit down" (78). Septimus sees and celebrates a relationship between time and language. He thinks that time is dynamic, symbolic, and potentially expressive like words. He can't raise his courage to meet with the changing of days and doesn't hope to hear others warning him "it is time", so he turns mad. Here Woolf gives out the keyword of this novel—“ode to Time”, even uses the adjective word “immortal” before it. Then Septimus ends his life by himself to represent “his ode to Time” while Clarissa employs her own lifestyle to give a picture of “her ode to Time”. Time is so important to the themes, structures, and characters in this novel. Now, we may understand why Woolf called the original working title as The Hours.

The novel ends as Clarissa is approaching Peter. We end by observing Clarissa Dalloway along with Peter, as he says: “there she was” (213). We see multiple images; we see the mystery, the variety and the richness of a human being who is far more than a hostess. Too often we expect when we finish a book to say that “I know all about that character.” One can't say that about Clarissa Dalloway.

During the monotonous life of everyday, Clarissa ponders over the meaning of time, love, even death. She never lets go of the doubt she feels about the decisions that have shaped her life, particularly her decision to marry Richard Dalloway instead of Peter Walsh. She understands that life with Peter would have been difficult, but at the same time she is uneasily aware that she sacrificed passion for the security and tranquillity of an upper-class life. During the thirty years she becomes old and sentimental. At times she wishes for a chance to live life over again. She experiences a moment of clarity and peace when she watches her old neighbour through her window. She knows clearly that time is very important to her and feels the uncertainty of life. After wrestling with the idea of death, she seems to understand something. She accepts that the life she has is all she'll ever get. She will not only endure but vanquish. Woolf, however, presents us with two ways of thinking about Mrs. Dalloway. On one hand, we may say that Clarissa has triumphed over herself at last, but Septimus has escaped from life. Clarissa is strong, whereas Septimus is weak. On the other hand, we may say that Septimus has released himself, but Clarissa has thrown herself again into suffering. If she chooses life, she must suffer like before. Woolf may have wanted to tell people that one will reach peace and escape from suffering only in death.