Virginia Woolf was born in London in 1882, the daughter of Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of The Dictionary of National Biography . After his death in 1904 Virginia and her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, moved to Bloomsbury and became the centre of The Bloomsbury Group . This informal collective of artists and writers which included Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry, exerted a powerful influence over early twentieth-century British culture. In 1912 Virginia married Leonard Woolf, a writer and social reformer. Three years later, her first novel The Voyage Out was published, followed by Night and Day (1919) and Jacob s Room (1922). These first novels show the development of Virginia Woolf s distinctive and innovative narrative style. It was during this time that she and Leonard Woolf founded The Hogarth Press with the publication of the co-authored Two Stories in 1917, hand-printed in the dining room of their house in Surrey. Between 1925 and 1931 Virginia Woolf produced what are now regarded as her finest masterpieces, from Mrs Dalloway (1925) to the poetic and highly experimental novel The Waves (1931). She also maintained an astonishing output of literary criticism, short fiction, journalism and biography, including the playfully subversive Orlando (1928) and A Room of One s Own (1929) a passionate feminist essay. This intense creative productivity was often matched by periods of mental illness, from which she had suffered since her mother s death in 1895. On 28 March 1941, a few months before the publication of her final novel, Between the Acts , Virginia Woolf committed suicide.

Mrs. Dalloway

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.

## Mrs Dalloway: A Guide to Reading

**Below are some helpful issues to think of as you read.**

**Stream-of-Consciousness**

The stream-of-consciousness writing style that Virginia Woolf uses is very different from the prosaic realism of F. Scott Fitzgerald. First, it is a much more “poetic” style, as every line carries more weight with figurative language. More importantly, the narrative shifts between different points of views of different characters. We enter the thoughts of different characters, and see actions from their different perspectives.

**Keeping Track of the Narrative Voices**

Keeping track of on who the narrative is focused can be challenging. It helps to keep aware of key names of characters, so that when you see their names, you can be on the alert that the narrative might have shifted to their point of view. The narrative focuses mostly on, but not exclusively:

**Mrs. Dalloway (Clarissa).**

**Peter Walsh (Mrs. Dalloways teenage boyfriend).**

**Septimus Smith (the shell-shock victim. You can easily recognize his narrative voice since he hallucinates most of the time, particularly the vision of his good friend Evans getting blown up by a mortar in the war).**

**Lacrezia (Mrs. Septimus Smith, the belagured wife of Septimus).**

**Mr. Richard Dalloway (Clarissa’s husband, whose voice we do not hear until after the middle of then novel).**

**Elizabeth (Mrs. Dalloway’s daughter. We hear snippets of her thoughts, but we do not get a longer narrative concerning her until her failed lunch with Ms. Kilman, and her bus ride back home.)**

**The One Day Structure of the Novel.**

Also, keep in mind that the entire novel revolves around one day, beginning at around 8 in the morning, and running until a couple of hours after midnight of the same day. The novel does jump back into the past, based upon people’s memories. The most significant memory is the weekend at Bourton, when Mrs. Dalloway meets Richard, her current husband, and ends her relationship with Peter Walsh.

After you have read the whole novel, it can be helpful to pick a random spot in the novel, and look at the passage closely, just to see how Woolf constructs narrative, how she jumps between people’s thoughts, and between the present and the past.

**The Big Diametric Opposition.**

A diametric opposition in literature essentially means anything that is the opposite of something else. *Mrs. Dalloway* focuses on two diametrically opposite voices, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith.

Clarissa, like her name, is clear, bright, dynamic, and very much a person who enjoys organizing dinner parties. She seems in control, at ease with her world.

Septimus, like his name, is dark, “septic,” underground, troubled, and extremely uncomfortable with the world. Shell-shocked, his thoughts are the opposite of Clarissa’s, in that they are cloudy, jumbled, confused and hallucinatory.

**Consciousness versus Unconsciousness**

One way you can think of the opposition between these two characters — and a theme in the novel — is that Clarissa very much represents *consciousness,* whereas Septimus represents *the unconscious.* Clarissa is in control and, at the same time, likes to control her surroundings. In other words, she has her mental bearings. Septimus, however, is not in control, nor is he in control of his surroundings. Quite the opposite of having his mental bearings, he is in the middle of a mental breakdown.

**The Conscious – Unconscious Union**

In a sort of “mystical” union, Woolf presents these two characters, *who never once meet in the whole novel,* as two necessary sides to human existence. Septimus needs more of Clarissa’s “clarity” and control in order to survive, whereas Clarissa is going to eventually have to confront emotions and passions in her life that she leaves repressed. The news she hears at the party of Septimus’s suicide disturbs her, and awakens her to an epiphany of the possibly messier aspects of life that she does not deal with.

Plot Summary of a Sort·

1. **(3)** MD buying flowers:

* memory of opening door, crossing threshold at Burton; Peter Walsh; empire; park;
* Hugh Whitbread; memory of not marrying Peter;
* part of the trees; Elizabeth and Mrs. Kilman; Flower shop

2. (14) *link: violent explosion*

* Septimus, moment of suspension--horror; Lucrezia worried about Sept;
* motor car; MD; motor car; Buckingham Palace; airplane; moment of suspension **11:00.**
* (22) trees coming to life; Septimus, birds speaking Greek; Evans behind railings. Sit in park; (25) Sept scapegoat;
* Maisie Johnson 19 the horror seeing Sept;
* Mrs. Dempster--pity for the loss of roses (27), follows airplane;
* Mr. Bentley; seedy man thinking of church

· 3. (29) MD home:

* Richard lunching with Millicent Bruton;
* attic room; virginity; attraction to women (32); match burning in a crocus; Sally Seaton kiss; Peter interrupts; looking in mirror; decides to mend dress;
* Peter Walsh calls; memory of pain; pocket knife; in love with a girl in India; weeps; she lost gaiety by not marrying him;
* Elizabeth interrupts; **11:30 **

· 4. (48)

* Peter Walsh’s walk: marching boys; statues; following girl; moments of pride in England; Regent’s Park, falls asleep

· 5. (56)grey nurse, visions of the solitary traveler-- mother goddess

· 6. (58) PW in Park:

* death of the soul, memory of Bourton, Clarissa’s prudery; Richard Dalloway arrives; PW feels conspiracy; perfect happiness; resignation; final terrible scene

· 7. (64)PW; *trans to Rezia*

* Septimus talking to Evans who was killed in the war; wedding ring; Septimus trees are alive, no crime, universal love (67); drowned sailor, beauty; **11:45 **
* PW passes by Sept & Rez; PW thinking about changes in society--makeup, water closets; Sally Seaton’s letter; Sally detested Hugh; PW has to ask for a job; thinking of Clarissa making a world of her own; sister Sylvia killed by a tree; atheist religion of doing good ; voice of song

· 8. *voice of ancient song trans to Rezia*

* R&S going to Dr, William Bradshaw; Septimus’s history; fall in love wi Miss Isabel Poole; the war; Milan, no feeling; no meaning to life; nervous breakdown, Dr. Holmes; Evans speaks. **12:00**

· 9.(**92/93?**)  *trans: Big Ben and motorcar*

* appointment wi Bradshaw, he recommends rest cure; Proportion; goddess of Conversion-- urge to dominate (100) ; **1:30  ***clocks trans to Hugh*
* Hugh and Richard Dalloway at Lady Bruton’s; Millie Brush; talk abt. Peter; Lady B’s obsession wi emigration to Canada; she naps
* Hugh and Richard window shopping; H looking at necklace; Richard leaves, buys flowers. Walking home.
* *Big Ben trans to Clarissa* **3:00** ****; Richard arrives; Clarissa on couch--thinking of parties, an offering
* (Elizabeth comes in; Miss Kilman’s history; rage replaced by calm of religion, but hates Clarissa; Clarissa never tries to convert anyone; love and religion;
* ()**3:30;** ****watching old lady at window; great mystery, separate rooms; interrupted by late clock
* (128)*Clocks trans to* Miss Kilman: control the flesh; infliction of unlovable body; having tea; Elizabeth leaves; MK to Westminster Cathedral
* Elizabeth omnibus up Whitehall; thinking about becoming a farmer or Dr.(137) Walks up Strand toward St. Paul; clouds
* (139)( *trans grey and yellow:* Septimus lying on sofa, watching shadows--fear no more; Rezia’s account of his behaviors; S watching R make hat; R takes child back, S alone; R sewing (146)(burn his drawings but not messages; R like a flowering tree, tries to protect S (149)Holmes coming up stairs; S throws himself out windows on to railings. **6:00** Rezia in cornfields

· 10. (**157**) PW hears sound of *ambulance;*

* triumph of civilization; moment when all comes together; memory of Clarissa (153) we exist everywhere, odd affinities, unseen might survive; how memories open up; his hotel; Daisy, his need for women;
* dinner at the hotel, conversation with the Morriss’s;
* decides to go to party; (162) prolonged evening; arrives at Clarissa’s

· 11. (165) party preparations;

* servants pov; women in the cloakroom; going to be a failure, PW critical; Ellie Henderson, invited at last minute; Sally Seaton; the Prime Minister; (175) Sir Harry; Professor Brierly; Miss Helena Parry, orchids of Burma; Lady Bruton; memories of Sally; Bradshaws, learns of Septimus’s death;
* MD withdraws, thinking of Septimus, reasons for his death; old lady opposite; clock strikes  ****

· 12. (186)PW & SS on sofa;

**Discussion Questions**

**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?