

## **A Literary Voyage into the Unconscious: A Philosophical Approach to the Psychological Novel in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)**

**Nariman LARBI**

Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem  
Algeria

### **Abstract:**

The present paper attempts to reawaken the avant-gardism of the literary Stream of Consciousness; a twentieth-century psychological concept that has been accommodated into fictional exertion through the Interior Monologue. The first practitioners of this technique and mode of narrative reportedness are Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, and James Joyce, all of whom are modernist fictional writers who engaged with what previous novelists of the nineteenth century failed to engage with. Woolf observed - in a lecture given to the Cambridge Heretics Society in May 1924 - that: "no generation since the world began has known quite so much about character as our generation". Woolf's fiction tends to be psychological, for she experiments with the working of the psyche of her characters and the permanence of the past in the present beyond the reach of realism. Her fiction treats the complex networks of emotions and memories of which the character is the center of the narrative. This paper accordingly, addresses the philosophical background of the Stream of Consciousness and its use within fictional exertion and how the latter is deployed in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) to show and uncover the anxieties vis-à-vis her thanatophobia, not only this, but also to express the anxieties of the Great War and the disillusionment towards the modern enterprise.

**Keywords:** Henri Bergson, interior monologue, modernist fiction, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), stream of consciousness, Virginia Woolf, William James

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## Introduction

Literature first and foremost is a linguistic art, and the beauty of its core resides in its ability to condense life within linguistic symbolism. Amongst the most significant genres of literature, we have fiction; *the novel*, besides poetry and drama, all of which attempt to represent the real through the imaginary; the fictional. Since the appearance and the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century, novelistic writings happen to reflect *the realism effect* of the modern enterprise, if we take examples of some major novels; Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849) and *Hard Times* (1854), Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), all of which tend to mirror the seamy side of the new industrial; newly *modernized* English society, i.e., reflecting what the industrial revolution, or modernization, inflicted upon them. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction were concerned with the effects of modernization while twentieth-century fiction took a pace forward with a different interest and what previous novelists failed to engage with. The concern of such modernist fiction was that of uncovering and disclosing the psychological working of the human mind beyond the reach of realism or the mere descriptive/prescriptive mode of narration. Modernist fiction applies the twentieth-century concern of the psychological aspect of the human mind brought about by Henri Bergson and William James into literary practice. Amongst the precursors of modernist British fictional productions using a break from the social realism-effect of earlier fiction are Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, and James Joyce. Virginia Woolf, being the core scope of this article, is amongst the first practitioners of the psychological novel, and the use of the interior monologue. The historicity and how Woolf's fiction employed such mental narration will be provided in this paper.

The aim of this research is also to relate the reasons behind the use of the Stream of Consciousness in Woolf's fiction; these could be due to her existential problem related to her nervous breakdown that resulted in itself from the disillusionment towards the consequences of hyper-modernization and what the latter inflicted upon humanity. The English colonial enterprise reached its peak in the twentieth century with the advents of the Great War, all of this came to a process of dehumanization with regard to the colonizers and the colonized on the one hand - such theme is covered in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) - and on the other, the novel focuses on the matter of death reflecting either Woolf's thanatophobia and existential anxiety, the struggle against depression or reflecting the contextual anxiety of the Great War.

## The Stream of Consciousness: Origins and Background

The Stream of Consciousness is a term coined and used by the twentieth-century psychologist William James who described it in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) as: "the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover" (p. 185). It is also referred to as "the flow of inner experiences" (Cuddon, 1999, p. 866). This concept entered into literary criticism and fictional use as a mode of narration that attempts to depict "the multitudinous thoughts and feelings which pass through the mind" (p.866). David Lodge (1992) describes it as "the continuous flow of thought and sensation in the human mind" (p. 42). The literary exertion of such a concept is referred to as *the interior monologue*, a technique first adopted by Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* (1760-67), and later by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky in

*Crime and Punishment* (1866), the French novelist, Edouard Dujardin in *Les Lauriers sont Coupés* (1888), and the German playwright and novelist, Arthur Schnitzler in *Leutnant Gustl* (1901), a technique that not only did shape and reflect the concern of the turn of the century but also fashioned a mode of narration that revolutionized the history of the novel - the realistic novel - that relied on descriptive/prescriptive narration, excluding the subjective inner voices of characters. British novelists of the early twentieth century championed this mode, and at the head of whom are Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Joyce in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Dorothy Richardson's twelve-volume *Pilgrimage* (1915-67), and Marcel Proust *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913-27), all of these works hailed the introspective writing utilising the interior monologue technique through which the Stream of Consciousness, or *the flow of experiences* were recalled from within. Woolf - being the major exemplary authorial figure that utilized and developed this dominant aspect/technique that characterizes the Modernist Novel; *the Stream of Consciousness/Interior Monologue* - believed that:

Modern fiction needed to break from previous generic conventions in order to express life properly, and their initial exploration of the possibilities of a subjective as opposed to a social and mimetic realism. A fundamental aspect of their new realism was a shift of focus in the representation of character and consciousness, in the light of the pervasive influence of psychological thought at the turn of the century, and how it repositioned the individual in relation to the world around him. This is not to say that earlier writers were not concerned with the pulse and vagaries of the human psyche. (as cited in Parsons, 2007, p. 55)

In comparison with the concerns displayed within nineteenth-century realistic fiction; characteristically descriptive of the external scenes/realities, Woolf observed - in a lecture given to the Cambridge Heretics Society in May 1924 - that, "no generation since the world began has known quite so much about character as our generation" (as cited in Parsons, 2007, 67-68). Indeed, modernist fictional writers defy their predecessors for not having disclosed the realism-effect of the mind; of the psychological aspect of characters, instead, their realism was mainly concerned with reflecting the socio-economic background of the time. Hence, what modernist fiction did was to push forward the social realism to the authenticity of the human psyche: the constant internal conflicts, the anxiety vis-à-vis the hyper modernization that the age came to, the disillusionment towards the advance which ushered to human destruction/dehumanization; the Great War, colonialism, mechanization ... etc.

The Stream of Consciousness, which is the defining feature of the modernist novel, tends to put the focus of the narrative on the subjective knowledge of the individual mind, identified as both its principled theme and dominant technique and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) is the crystal example of the psychological deployment into fictional exertion. Parsons (2007) notes that:

By the time Woolf [was] struggling with how to portray modern consciousness in the early 1910s, the notion of the self as primarily stable and rational had been exchanged for something far more variable and intangible, subject not only to its particular biases and

perspective but also to the more mysterious workings of the mind and the unconscious. (p. 56)

Etymologically, the Stream of Consciousness derives from William James's description - in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) - of how "thoughts, perceptions, memories, associations, and sensations in all their multitude are experienced by the mind" (as cited in Parsons, 2007, 56). William James associates the Stream of Consciousness to "the never-ending associative flow of our conscious or half-conscious thoughts and perceptions and feelings, the activity of the mind that we are always at least vaguely sensible of" (p. 56). However, the Stream of Consciousness is a concept, not a literary technique, and in literary criticism, the equivalent term for it is that of *the interior monologue*, along with *time shift* from analepsis, to prolepsis and vice versa. The interior monologue attempts to represent, reflect, and imitate the hidden psychological aspect in the symbolic form of language.

Such psychological realism in literary exertion also owes much to the influence of the psychoanalyst of the first decades of the twentieth century; Henri Bergson (1859-1941) who theorized on the impossibility of a real reflection of the Stream of Consciousness into symbolic expressionism only for the process of condensing the abstract, or the internal working of the individual mind into the linguistic system, and through this process, the quality and authenticity of consciousness could easily be lost. Bergson suggests:

If some bold novelist, tearing aside the cleverly woven curtain of our conventional ego, shows us under this appearance of logic a fundamental absurdity, under this juxtaposition of simple states an infinite permeation of a thousand impressions which have ceased to exist that instant they are named, we commend him for having known us better than we know ourselves. (1889; trans 1910, p. 133)

Since this paper is to focus on Woolf's fiction and how it characterizes the modernist novel with an existential tone, I am to proceed on an introductory view of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). An early twentieth century novel chronologically aligned with WWI, and the advents of the Great War are reflected in the novel and yet the primary thematic concern and differential break from the earlier characteristics of the novel are that of the treatment of the psyche through recollecting and revisiting her past within a fraction of seconds, visualizing the evolution of her life, how she was and what she turned and yet with a regretful nostalgic sentiment, a conflict within herself. The whole novel is a narrative that condenses an entire life in one day. The recollection of memories throughout the stages of Clarissa Dalloway's earlier life since her adolescent years, the way she loved life and had a passion for it to change over time. Clarissa recollects the memories of her first love, Peter Walsh whom she did not marry; instead, she went for a man who has a considerable fortune, leaving Peter Walsh, a passionate man though not fitting the norm of British social status, to marry Mr. Dalloway. The novel sketches Septimus, a young man who suffers from the impacts of his contribution in the Great War; he fell into hallucinations, mental dementia, and depression.

### **From Social Realism to Psychological Realism**

Woolf suggests in her essay; *The Common Reader* (1925), that the appearance of the novel came in parallel with the seventeenth-and eighteenth- century economic and ideological revolutions in human history brought about by the Age of Enlightenment alongside the industrial revolution, an age where:

Great changes had come over English life, and the novel had chosen, or had been forced to choose its direction? A middle class had come into existence, able to read and anxious to read not only about the loves of princes and princesses, but about themselves and the details of their humdrum lives. Stretched upon a thousand pens, prose had accommodated itself to the demand, it had fitted itself to express the facts of life rather than poetry.

The novel is, henceforth, a democratization form of literature, a genre where all social classes, and in particular the new working-class Man could consume and relate to, contrary to the fiction of previous centuries that represented the bourgeois ideal characters. A new modern Man within a new industrial age/context, producing and consuming a new genre of literature that reflects the new middle-class Man and his surrounding context.

The novel has evolved through the centuries, and tendencies came to appear in accordance with their relevant times. Nineteenth-century fiction came to be obsessed, as already noted, with the descriptive mode of narration focusing on details of the seamy side of society, its endeavor was to denounce the negative impacts of the industrial revolution and all that culminated in from poverty, hardship, child labor, the ardent chase of the material, to marital disorder. Such realistic fiction came to be defied later by the naturalistic novel which strove to denounce the ruthlessness of human nature. Influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution and Claude Bernard's determinist experimentation in science, naturalism puts forward Hegel's notion of *the World of Becoming* against *the World of Being*, it believes in the triumph of *l'Être* over *le Devenir*. It assumes that the genetic and external forces shape, form, and pre-determine the human nature and that Man's intelligence has no involvement in their construct. Hence, naturalistic fiction, the precursor of which is Emile Zola, came as a reaction to the restrictions inherent in the realistic emphasis on the ordinary; instead, it deployed themes from corruption, domestic violence, sexual exploits, to prostitution.

Naturalistic fiction was followed by modernist fiction, which is psychological per se. The principle criterion of modernist fiction, according to the novelist and literary critic David Lodge is that,

It is experimental in form, it is much concerned with consciousness (also, with the subconscious working of human mind), the structure of external objective events is diminished in scope and scale, or presented obliquely and selectively in order to make room for introspection, and reverie. (as cited in Purdy, 1990, p. 132)

Woolf suggests that the twentieth century “had witnessed a change in the conception of character that necessitated a change in methods of literary characterization” (as cited in Parsons, 2007, p. 68). Such analysis has been made at a moment of crises; the death of Edward VII, the opening of the first exhibition of post-impressionist art, the political and social unrest marked by the rise of the suffragette movement and the Welsh miners’ strike, Woolf wanted to voice out the ending of an era of stability. England, for Woolf, was, now, entering a new era of conflicts and crises;

The present suddenly seemed cut off from the past, alienated by the War and with it the loss of values and beliefs that had underpinned previous assumptions about a permanent and universal structure to life [...] Woolf’s argument is not so much that the human character itself has changed, however, but rather the context within which it is shaped and understood. (pp. 68-69)

### **The Stream of Consciousness, an Outcry against the Manacles of Time & Death in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)**

As already stated, Woolf opted for a new tradition that counteracted the conventional descriptive tradition of the previous realistic fiction represented by such novelists as Bennett, Galsworthy, Dickens, and Hardy. Her position upon what the novel does is more than the mere consideration of the character’s surrounding environment since the character, in modernist fiction, is represented in his abstract entity; *l’être*, that overlaps senses and as such, Woolf concentrated on the stream of thoughts, feelings and sensations going through the minds of the characters, she sketches on Modern Fiction in *The Common Reader* (1925 that:

Life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this’. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel [...] life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. It is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit. (as cited in McKeon, 2000, p. 741)

Hence the modernist novel or the psychological novel is more experimental and uncovering of the human condition than a descriptive view of his/her external environment and what he/she is exposed to, or rather, the transmogrification of Man by the external forces.

Virginia Woolf was, accordingly, concerned with the working of the psyche and started to experiment with the Stream-of-Consciousness; the Interior Monologue technique in her fiction and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925); amongst the most significant novels in British literature, not only for its psychological aspect and the use of the Stream of Consciousness mode of narration, but also for its tormenting thematic approach. The novel could almost be categorized under existential fiction, for it measures and weighs the notion of time which differs from the internal psychological concept of time along with the manacles of time against the mortality of Man. The novel also treats a historical criterion, that of the disillusionment of the soldiers towards the Great War, Woolf deploys the character Septimus who, on his return from the War, experiences a condition of

hysteria, and mental breakdown. The theme of death is treated as an element amongst others that is at the core of human anxiety. The new Man, i. e., the hypermodern Man is also criticized in the novel, alluding to the dehumanization inflicted by the appeal to reason and rational thinking which purports progress at the cost of *the Other*.

The novel could even be read as a journey to the psychological state of Virginia Woolf. She ponders a multitude of existential conditions through a plethora of reasons behind human anxiety with a strong appeal to the belief in the absurdity of the human condition and historical evolvment. Woolf herself experienced a mental breakdown where she was subject to constant chronic anxiety, hence her preoccupation with the description of that which is beyond the perceived; “the depth and subtleties beyond the reach of realism” (Ontology, p. 203). Her novels, henceforth, displayed the persistence of the presence of the past in the present through the use of time shift technique; from analepsis to prolepsis and vice versa, “her meditation on time, its contraction and expansion, the permanence of the past in the present are her main themes” (p. 203).

*Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which is the concern of this paper, suggests the complex networks of emotions of which Clarissa Dalloway is the center. It could be viewed as a voyage of a lifetime within a *durée* of a day where she sets a party, in which all relatives of hers from adolescent years to her fifties are invited, relatives that are part of her most striking memories that recall themselves all along. Through the novel, she refers to the complexity of the mind and how earlier events of a lifetime shape and monitor the mental state of oneself. The novel also includes the traumas of the Great War which is inevitably related to the disillusionment faced concerning the modernity that promised a better human condition while it came to destruct itself through advances that killed humanity.

### **The Interior Monologue, the Doorway to Expressing a Multitude of Anxieties**

Woolf had a different and unique approach to the novel contrary to her predecessors and contemporaries - excluding Joyce to whom she appreciated the use of psychological narration and *bildungsroman* exertion. Her approach was one that represented characters in their most human and vulnerable condition in that: “the writer has somehow to convey such mental impressions without worrying about representing external material” (Goldman, 2006, p. 104). Woolf creates her characters’ lives with a multitude of dimensions suggesting in *The Common Reader* (1925) that: “The proper stuff of fiction” does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss”.

The interior monologue - being the equivalent fictional exertion of the Stream of Consciousness - which is a narrative technique through which a psychological descriptive process could be made - was prominent in Woolf’s fiction. She employs it with subtlety, for she “does not intervene with narrative explanations, but leaves the memory itself to resonate for us” (Showalter, 2011, p. xix). Woolf, expressed through this technique not only the flow of memories and captions of images of a younger age - when she was an adolescent whereby mild remorse is displayed towards Peter Walsh whom she loved but did not marry, for she had to marry a more elevated man who had a considerable position in society - but also to uncover the absurd and malaise of the

human condition with regard to the status quo of the time; with the advents of the Great War where she captured the insanity of British military servants on the colonial shore through the character; Septimus, who suffered from mental dementia.

A parallel concern of Woolf was also sketched through Clarissa, that of the dumbfoundedness at the governing class who “reacted with stoic denial” (Showalter, 2011, p. xliii) to the injustices and tragedies of the Great War, she was mitigated at this simulated (or not simulated) indifference towards life and changes of post-war England. Septimus who returned from the War with mental deficiency and lack of psychic defense could be paralleled to Woolf’s contemporary; Joseph Conrad, where the character Kurtz, in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), also returns disillusioned from the British colonial presence in the Congo. Septimus “would argue [...] about killing themselves, and explain how wicked people were, how he could see them making up lies as they passed in the street. He knew all their thoughts, he said; he knew everything. He knew the making of the world, he said” (Woolf, 1925, p. 50).

Showalter (2011) goes further asserting that Septimus “feels so much because others feel too little” (p. xliii), and yet this exposes Clarissa’s hypersensitivity to *the* anything surrounding her, the tumultuous flow of her emotions and thoughts are uncovered, an inference that Clarissa might be the character suffering from emotional turbulence.

Anxiety to social change was also evident where, in a famous essay called *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924), she argued that: since 1910, “all human relations have shifted - those between Masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature” (p. xvi). A new mode of narration must have been created to fit this change, a new era and characters could not be sufficiently and adequately represented by the literary conventions of her predecessors with the mere reliance on the material and external/environmental facts.

Another devouring anxiety was that of her thanatophobic apprehension; a frightful fear of death, at fifty-two of age, she starts assimilating or instead; wondering about the idea of ceasing to exist; death, invoking a consideration about the real essence of *Being*; existing, her repetitive contemplation upon life surmounted all of these anxieties, she goes:

But everyone remembered; what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab. Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it, or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? (Woolf, 1925, p. 7)

At similar accordance, she is troubled with the notion of time, reflecting the philosophers of the Stream of Consciousness; William James and Henri Bergson, the latter whom she aligns with upon their position on the definition and difference of historical/chronological and psychological time. In his *Time and Free Will* (1888), Bergson argues/defines the historical time as being external,

linear, and measured in terms of the vertical clock-time dimension, whereas the psychological time is the horizontal dimension, it is internal and subjective. It is a relevant notion measured by the relative emotional and mental intensity of a moment. For Bergson, a thought or feeling could be measured in terms of the number of perceptions, memories, and associations attached to it. For Woolf and her contemporaries concerned with the Stream of Consciousness, regarded the external event as being:

Significant primarily for the way it triggers and releases the inner life. While an exterior incident or perception may be only a brief flash of chronological time, its impact upon the individual consciousness may have a much greater duration and meaning. (Showalter, 2011, p. xx)

Anxieties, of time and disillusionment towards the Great War along with the thanatophobic anxiety were expressed and redeemed as if voicing them out has the equivalent benefit of a therapy, Woolf pontificates poetically in a passage that despite all that life circumstances happen to bring forth, one has to keep a dose of optimism to their spirit;

He had only to open his eyes; but a weight was on them; a fear. He strained; he pushed; he looked; he saw Regent's Park before him. Long streamers of sunlight dawned at his feet. The trees waved, brandished. We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create. Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked, at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the makings, beauty sprang instantly [...] all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere. (Woolf, 1925, p. 52)

### Conclusion

To conclude with, the Stream of Consciousness is a twentieth-century psychological concept theorized upon by William James and Henri Bergson, such a concept has been borrowed to literary exertion, and the equivalent of which is termed: *the Interior Monologue* technique; a technique that defied the conventional mode of narration which tends to be descriptive/prescriptive of the external environment of characters and regardless of its endeavor to adopt the realism-effect through its obsession with the material, it still failed to capture life. Modern fictional exertion of the Stream of Consciousness imposed traveling through time: from analepsis to prolepsis. Such concern with the psyche helped consider the character as a human entity describing their inner thoughts, conflicts concerning their personal emancipation and also regarding what the modern Man came to experience; an evaluation of the contemporary enterprise that came to kill humanity. Woolf fiction is the prototypical example of the exertion of the Stream of Consciousness since her fiction overlaps the inner working of the psyche with regard to the aftermaths of modernization, not only this, but it also uncovers the absurd human condition with all that it entails, hence her fiction, and in particular her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), expresses a multifold of anxieties from aging and thanatophobia to the mechanism of modernity.

The Stream of Consciousness became a conventional technique and is utilized in most of the later novels, contemporary postmodern writers adopt it such as James Kelman in his *How late it was, How late* (1994), A. L. Kennedy in *The Blue Book* (2011), and in most of Julian Barnes's fiction mostly: *Arthur & George* (2005), *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), and *The Noise of Time* (2016).

#### About the Author:

**Dr. Nariman LARBI** is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) of British Literature: the English Novel and Literary Movements, at Mostaganem University, Algeria. Graduated in 2008, she was granted a BA in Australian Studies from University Rennes 2, Brittany - France. She took pre-graduate linguistic courses in Cambridge University, England, obtained a Magister Degree in British Literature from Oran University and a PhD Degree from Tlemcen University, Algeria. She is fascinated with the Philosophy of Literature and researches on Modern and Postmodern British and Arabic Fiction. ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0888-2741>

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