

## **BODILY OPPRESSION AND INTERACTION: A SPATIAL ANALYSIS ON *MRS. DALLOWAY***

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### **Abstract**

Virginia Woolf is one of the most influential novelists in British literature and also one of the pioneers who leads the trend of literary modernism. Just as artists engaged in Cubic painting and sculpture in the same developmental period, such modern novelists as Virginia Woolf were keenly aware of the significant influence of space on their artistic creation. Therefore, this essay tries to explore the interrelation between men and space through analyzing Woolf's modernist masterpiece—*Mrs. Dalloway*. Focusing on Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, this essay aims to interpret how they struggle against bodily oppressions, namely the restraints and controls imposed on the individual body by the external space, and how they make an effort to interact with space as a way out. Clarissa's interaction with space involves her participation in constructing urban space through walking, directly affecting the external space; at the same time, urban space also affects her internal space by cheering her up when she walks in the city. And as for Septimus, he integrates into space by committing suicide so that his flesh is eventually decomposed to dust and returns to nature. By analyzing all those, this essay tries to argue that modern society not only makes people suffer from spatial oppression but also offers new opportunities and development prospects, enabling people to liberate themselves from numerous oppressions and create positive integration and communication with their surrounding space, which finally reaches a balanced state.

**Keywords:** *Mrs. Dalloway*; bodily Oppression; Interaction

### **Introduction**

The novel *Mrs. Dalloway* charts a single day of June in London, and it depicts what is in the characters' eyes and minds while they walk through the city of London. Woolf is fond of collecting experiences from her lovable London and showing them to her readers. In the entry of *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, she observes that "London itself perpetually attracts, stimulates, and gives me a play and a story and a poem, without any trouble, save that of moving my legs through the streets" (1981:186). In the book *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf believes "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (4). In her opinion, a room of one's own, as an individual space, plays a key role in writing and even in life, which to some extent shows her

strong spatial awareness in her writing career and indicates that analyzing Woolf's modernist work—*Mrs. Dalloway* from a spatial perspective is well-founded.

## **Literature Review**

Since walking is the direct impression on the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway*, many applied researches on *Mrs. Dalloway* have become increasingly interested in space. Spatial studies on *Mrs. Dalloway* can be divided into two parts: descriptive studies and thematic studies.

Firstly, descriptive studies present the detailed route, place and distance of walking in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Dorothy Brewster pinpoints that Woolf used her beloved city as a motivating force for her characters in her book *Virginia Woolf's London* (1959). Andelys Wood presents the walking route in detail of the main characters in the novel, with the exact time and place in the article "Walking the Web in the Lost London of *Mrs. Dalloway*" (2003).

Secondly, thematic studies, with various topics of spatial reading on this novel, mainly include spatial politics and modernity experience as flâneur. Susan Squier shows Woolf's evolving belief that women could "reframe" the city space and use it to imagine and create a more egalitarian world in the book *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City* (1985). Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth edit the book *Locating Woolf : The Politics of Space and Place*. It collects articles on the places and spaces in Woolf's works from eleven well-known scholars, and it includes gender spaces, urban spaces and rural spaces, post-colonial spaces and trans-cultural spaces. In this book, they argue that "Woolf articulated the exclusions and boundaries that regulated women's bodies and minds" and "constantly traversed the borders between outer and inner space (Snaith and Whitworth 2-3). San Youngjoo discusses spatial politics on Woolf's novels together with D.H Lawrence in *Here and Now: The Politics of Social Space in D.H Lawrence and Virginia Woolf*. San demonstrates the ways in which Woolf exposes gender and class relations materialized in physical and discursive private spaces in *Mrs. Dalloway*. As for the spatial studies on modernity experience in *Mrs. Dalloway*, "flâneur" is a key word in it. Rachel Bowlby discusses walking from a different point of view, by which she connects the street wandering experience with the flâneur in *Walking, Women and Writing: Virginia Woolf as Flaneuse* (1992). Ching-fang Tseng further details it by coming up with flâneur (male) and flaneuse (female).

In fact, some critics notice the problem of oppression in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In 1989, Jeremy Tambling analyzed the oppression of Clarissa in his essay "Repression in *Mrs. Dalloway's* London". However, these two researches observe the oppression in *Mrs. Dalloway* but they do not focus on space and they also do not mention any positive attempt to eliminate the oppression.

Various studies of *Mrs. Dalloway*, which focus on space, seldom discuss the efforts of the characters to find a way out in the city and the mutual influence and interaction between space and people. Therefore, this essay tries to argue that Woolf offers some

attempts for the individual to interact and communicate with the external space through the spatial reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

## **Research Method**

Documentary research and textual analysis. This essay is conducted after a massive documentary research by using the Internet as well as library to collect books, research papers and journals relevant to Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*. And this essay is based on a detailed study of the characters Clarissa and Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*. With focus on the underlying obsession with spatial oppressions, the details textual analysis of the novel will be done to examine the embodiment of the struggle and the response of them.

## **Discussion**

Different from some other novelists who express oppression by describing it directly, Virginia Woolf sharply observes the oppression on people from a spatial view. Michel Foucault also comes up with his focus on space as “current anxiety is fundamentally concerned with space” (24). The unstable boundary between the external space and her personal body space makes Clarissa feel squeezed by the social space, which results in her sense of deformity of her body.

The body is not just the flesh part of men, but also the soul. Body is both “mind and the body, the personal and the social” (Pile 185). In the book *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out the spatiality of the body. Besides, Lefebvre also articulates that “each living body is space and has space” (170). So if every individual can be regarded as an independent body space, Clarissa’s body space is the most impressive and meaningful in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

“The whole of (social) space proceeds from the body, even though it so metamorphoses the body that it may forget it altogether” (Lefebvre 405). Therefore, understanding the body is the beginning of understanding the social space. One’s sense of his or her body space reflects the relation between the body space and the externally social space. Social space may metamorphose the body, which turns out to be changing boundary of the body space, namely changes of the body.

The bodily oppression of Clarissa is mainly reflected in her deformed body and invisible body. Deformed body, as the phrase suggests, means having the form changed.

She began to go slowly upstairs...she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her. (Woolf, 1996: 23)

Clarissa feels her body “shriveled”, which implies the sense of “unstable limits” of human body (Galutskikh 187). Galutskikh continues to explain that “the image of a deformed body is employed by Woolf in the context of literary semantics to signify the

disappointed, depressed state of an individual" (188). The feeling of "shriveled" is not only in a physical sense but also in a mental sense. On one hand, "shriveled" shows that Clarissa feels aged and her body also changes because of it. On the other hand, "shriveled" reveals the change of Clarissa's body space. Clarissa connects the difficulty which she is facing now, especially the annoyance from Lady Bruton, with the feeling of her bodily change. Clarissa keeps being disturbed by things about Lady Bruton. Lady Bruton is a sixty-two years old woman of noble birth whose lunch party is going to discuss about Peter Walsh, politics and the letter to *Times* with her guests. Thus, Lady Bruton's lunch can be regarded as an activity in the public space. But Clarissa is not invited to the lunch, which reveals that she is kept away from the public space and her body space is not allowed to get into the public space in this case. Therefore, Clarissa feels her body being oppressed.

In fact, Clarissa is not completely oppressed by the external space since she still has her own small room. Though it is merely a narrow attic, it can be regarded as an independent space. And it is rare for women to have their own independent space at that time. What is more, Clarissa can hold a party at home, which is a combination of public space and private space. To some extent, attending a party and being a hostess of it imply that she gets an access to the public space. And Clarissa has the freedom to walk out of her private zone to the streets of London in order to buy flowers, freely feeling the vivacity of the city. All these limited freedoms have brought her relief and consolation so that she can temporarily forget the bondage to women from the society. At that time, women of the upper-middle class were circled at home and had to be allowed or accompanied by their family members if they prepared to go outside. If women wanted to know what was going on outside and the only thing they could do is peeking out from inside the house. Thus, compared with other women from upper-middle class, Clarissa is able to own a more flexible body space.

But the oppression of Clarissa's body space is not fixed, gradually changing with the development of society day by day. The boundary between social space and her body space is not clear, which causes the ups and downs of her mood. Especially when she knows that Mrs. Bruton does not have the plan to invite her to the dinner, the boundary is moved again and Clarissa feels squeezed from the social space, almost making her collapse. The deformed body is essentially the changing of the boundary between the social space and the body space. Sometimes she is satisfied with the space she has gained but sometimes she is disappointed that she is still rejected by the externally social space. Therefore, Clarissa's sense of her body is also changeable.

Moreover, Clarissa's sense of deformed body is also reflected when she is in her own room. In the novel, Clarissa spends much of her time in the single day at her home, more specifically in her room. As a lady from the upper class, Clarissa is not willing to decide to break from her class. What she can do is to feel her deformed body and hide herself in her room to protect and comfort her innocent and lonely inner world in the lively party. "There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room...Narrower and narrower would her bed be...The room was an attic, the bed narrow" (Woolf, 1996: 23). Clarissa emphasizes how narrow the bed is and her sense of oppression

from the bed and her room. Not only is the bed narrow, but also the attic. Especially as a comparison with the big house, the narrow attic reveals Clarissa's narrow living space. Thus, Clarissa's body space only gets a tiny scope of activity. It implies that her body is pressed both in a physical sense and mental sense, which results in Clarissa's sense of deformity of her body.

In addition, Clarissa's sense of deformity of her body is also incarnated in an imaginative way. "She could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet" (Woolf, 1996: 23). This implies Clarissa's deformed body as well. Virginity represents the days of girlhood. Clarissa's thought of still having virginity after childbirth shows her admiration and pursuit for the lost girlhood from the perspective of physiology. She is eager to return to her girlhood, the fantastic days and keep eternal youth. Thus, she even begins to imagine the changes in her body which turns out to be impossible. She has a daughter Elizabeth, so it is not possible for her to be a virgin again. However, her obsession with her girlhood changes her sense of her body in an imaginative way.

Another character who is suffering from bodily oppression in *Mrs. Dalloway* is Septimus Warren Smith. "The character Septimus was taken shape in Woolf's imagination as part of a manuscript story entitled '*The Prime Minister*', and Septimus serves as foil and double to Clarissa" (Woolf, 1996: vii).

Sir William is an expert of controlling his patient's will and body in his work. His way of controlling patient's body includes two aspects: convert patients' cognition of their bodies and attempt to control patients' bodies.

...huddled up in armchairs, they watched him go through, for their benefit, a curious exercise with the arms, which he shot out, brought sharply back to his hip, to prove (if the patient was obstinate) that Sir William was master of his own actions, which the patient was not. There some weakly broke down; sobbed, submitted. (Woolf, 1996: 75)

Sir William tortures his patient by letting them realize the truth that they have some problems in controlling their body. Merleau-Ponty sets an example of the patient whom traditional psychiatry would be the representative of psychic blindness is unable to perform "abstract" movements with his eyes shut, such as the orders of moving arms and legs (103). Patients have some problems in pointing out some parts of the body that their psychiatrist asks them to do with their eyes shut. But in Sir William's case, he does not forbid his patients to close their eyes. But he still chooses to make a shock for the patients in such a way as to gain a sense of accomplishment by showing off his power. The body becomes a central battlefield of will. Usually, a psychiatrist treats patients from the perspective of psychology rather than physiology. Even at Woolf's time, when the society did not have enough knowledge about mental disease, the psychiatrist may ask their patients to rest and avoid the struggle from life. However, Sir William regards himself as a representative of authority, science and power, which gives him the right to master others. That is why he tries to show his patients that he has the absolute power to control his body while some patients

cannot. By doing that, he intends to instill the idea that he also has the power to control their will on his patients. And then his patients start to doubt themselves. Some gradually lose their independent thinking and will. This is Sir William's trap and his first step for body control by confusing his patients' cognition of the body.

After the success of the first step of body control to the patients, Sir William manages to carry out the second step. The principle of Sir William's treatment is to keep proportion until "a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve" (Woolf 1996:73). The figure indicates Sir William's attempted body control to his patients is accurate and his desire for controlling it is growing. Different from the first attempt: convert the patients' recognition. This step is Sir William's intention to put it into practice. He even wants to change others' bodies and his attempt to change others' weights is a case in point. Besides, it is not a unique instance, but has its counterpart. Dr. Holmes also cares too much about the details of the body, which is reflected by the accurate numbers as well. "If Dr. Holmes found himself even half a pound below eleven stone six, he asked his wife for another plate of porridge at breakfast" (Woolf 1996:68). Different from Sir William's two steps to force his will on his patients, Dr. Holmes here uses the weight principle just for himself. However, this idea also implies is his principle to deal with problem. He controls his weight as carrying on the rule for life, which must be extremely precise and turns out to be as strict as Sir William. But Dr. Holmes has his own way to treat his patients, that is prescribing some sleeping pills or other medicine for them to make them fall asleep even when they do not have been troubled with insomnia.

Under the guise of science, they think that they have the power to make the disadvantaged patients devastated by their power and authorities. In fact, they were the symbol of social order in England at that time. The ruling class did whatever they wished while the underprivileged people were deprived of their basic right to speak. With the growing emphasis on space in all walks of life, modernist novelists such as Woolf have gradually become aware of the interrelation between human and space. They have begun to explore the spatial oppression upon people and strive to get ride of it. Being trapped by the spatial oppression, Clarissa and Septimus attempt to find a way out so they try in their respective ways to interact with the external space. Clarissa manages to occupy more space in the city by means of walking while Septimus devotes his life to what he believes as truth and philosophy—integrating the body into the nature. By doing these, Clarissa and Septimus both interact with the external space surrounding them and gain freedom from their solutions.

In the novel, Clarissa has a strong preference for walking on the London streets, which she expresses quite directly. She answers as "I love walking in London. Really, it's better than walking in the country" when Hugh asks her "Where are you off to?" (Woolf 1996:5). Apparently, Clarissa transfers the topic. Hugh asks her where to go but she does not answer with her destination of walking, such as "I am going to buy some flowers". Instead, she answers with her affection to walking in the city, which implies that buying flowers as the seemingly only purpose for Clarissa to walk out of her home is less important than the meaning of walking in the city itself. Clarissa's

walking is not aimless, but a discovery for the city, partiality for wandering in the city streets.

Walking is also a way of spatial practice. De Certeau comes up with the importance of walking in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He indicates that walkers in the city are the participants in the construction of urban space. In geometry, the roads in the city are converted into space by pedestrians.

The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below”, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. (Certeau, 93)

He explains that walkers’ bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text, which implies the interaction and mutual impact between walkers and the external city space. Only those walkers who are on the ground in the crowd is the true city explorers. Therefore, at the level of exploring the city, Clarissa plays an important pioneer role in integrating herself into the large space of public society, using its own body to actively hold the city in space and opening up a new ideal for building Spatial channels. De Certeau also observes the influence of walking as “their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces” (97) and “walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be” (101), which reveals walking’s non-negligible impact on the external space.

Clarissa’s walking in the city streets is a way to participate in the construction of urban space. Meanwhile, urban space also affects her internal space to make her feel happy and free when in the streets. Clarissa and the external space communicate and interact with each other by means of walking in the city streets.

Septimus’ death cannot be simply interpreted as cowardice or negativity. Septimus has his philosophy of integration between his own body and external space. “It was the heat wave presumably, operating upon a brain made sensitive by eons of evolution. Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock” (Woolf 1996:51). Septimus understands life and the body in a poetic way. Flesh is melted and every individual body integrates into one. His body fades in front of him. Human cannot avoid facing the day that “All shall return to earth. Dust to dust”. It conforms to the law of nature. When Septimus jumps out of the window, what ahead of him is the disintegration of the flesh and blood, and the death of the flesh in the earth. His connection with the world was temporarily broken. His body in the physical sense disappears, but the nerve fiber—the soul will always be somewhere. It can be preserved in the world forever like “veil upon a rock”.

On the process of discovering the truth of life, Septimus imagines himself as someone who is lying on the world.

He lay very high, on the back of the world. The earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh' their stiff leaves rustled by his head. Music began clanging against the rocks up here... (that music should be visible was a discovery) ...Now he withdraws up into the snows, and roses hang about him. (Woolf, 1996: 51)

This sentence is like a paragraph selected from myths. On the one hand, this description of Septimus presents how powerful he is. He is not an ordinary human anymore but appearing as a God. Different from the previous impression as the weak because of his mental disease, Septimus is now powerful. In addition, Septimus can even see the sound with his eyes and he is truly exposed to the beauty of music. He is much more than a human being. He seems to understand the truth of life and human and derives his own philosophy. He is God-like or he imagines himself as God, quietly watching everything in the world, the beauty of nature, and the growth of life. In the novel, Woolf describes him as "the Lord who had gone from life to death (72). It falls into the water and sinks to the bottom of the sea, but it rises again. Therefore, it implies that his philosophy about life and death and his wisdom towards nature are like the ideas from God, which means they are full of mystery and beyond the realm of human's comprehension. When Septimus jumps out of the window, Dr. Holmes cries "The coward" (Woolf, 1996: 108). Dr. Holmes, as the representative of the rational of the society, cannot understand Septimus' intention of death, which indicates that Septimus' philosophy about death is over Dr. Holmes's head and is beyond normal people's understanding.

On the other hand, this paragraph indicates that Septimus integrates his body with all things in the world and his integration with nature is omnipresent. To begin with, some words, such as "back of the world", "earth", "rock" and so on, show the wide range of place. He "lay high" and "the earth thrilled beneath him" while "flower grew through his flesh" and "leaves rustled by his head". By using the words "high" and "beneath", it shows the vertical distance is long. And Septimus feels he can move freely from where the flowers grow to where snows. This climate shift also reveals the spacious moving of Septimus. By using the words "lay", "beneath", "flesh" and "head" together, this paragraph detailedly indicates Septimus integrates his whole body into the nature. All those features embody Septimus' pervasive integration with all the things and nature.

Septimus commits suicide by jumping out of the window, falls into the external space and integrates into it. The flesh disappears and returns to dust eventually, which is a way of integration between the body and the external space. The external space opens its arms to Septimus, who fuses with nature at the cost of his own life. And twenty years after the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the creator of the character Septimus and the author of the novel followed Septimus' footstep. Was she also trying to integrate into nature and pursue her freedom of the body and the soul?



## Conclusions

Virginia Woolf, a female writer with mental disease, suffered from the same spatial oppression as her characters Clarissa and Septimus do in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. As a woman, she has similar personal experience about the imaginative limits for women in many aspects of social life. The society sets some boundaries for women's body, which causes oppression upon them. As a mental patient, she also accepted the treatment for her mental disease which instead drove her crazy and anxious. Therefore, Woolf is sensitive enough to be aware of the danger and oppression caused by the external space and the body. This awareness of the interrelation between human and his space gives rise to the exploration into the spatial oppression upon people and their attempts to get out of it.

The bodily oppressions on *Mrs. Dalloway* are employed to depict the constraints and controls foisted on them. Clarissa's changeable awareness of her body space results in her senses of deformity and invisibility while Septimus' experience of being bodily controlled leads to his sense of oppression. In order to get rid of the spatial oppressions, these two characters try to interact with space through occupying space and integrating into space, which offers a new and creative way to communicate with the external space. Walking through the city with feet — a spatial practice — combines the body space with the urban space, as the protagonist Clarissa does, which enhances people's participation and creativity in the urban space and enables people to satisfy themselves and acquire an aesthetic experience for their internal space. And it is a wisdom and philosophy of life to uphold the idea that all things integrate into one while constructing a new and ideal living space as Septimus does. Besides, it eases the oppression caused by social space as well as opens the door for people to create their own living space.

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