

## TRILOGY OF EXISTENCE: A STUDY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S MRS. DALLOWAY

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze the trilogy of existence revealed by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* from the perspective of the theory of existentialism. Focusing on the subjective individual, Søren Kierkegaard divides life into three existence spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. The first two parts of this paper deal with two main characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* "Richard Dalloway" as the representative of aesthetics and "Clarissa" as the representative of ethics in this novel. Finally, the possibility of religion is to be investigated which is divided into three parts based upon Kierkegaard's philosophy: The religious A, the Religious B and death as the brightest point of religion. The outcome suggests the limitations of each sphere for human being. Furthermore, it shows that the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* cannot get any salvation by focusing on just one sphere and overlooking the others spheres.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard

### 1 Introduction

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) wrote experimental novels notable for their expressive form and poetic language. "While her primary reputation is that of an experimental novelist, her collected essays and her two book-length essays, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), establish her importance as a feminist and cultural critic" (Shaffer 401). Her experimental aesthetic, her founding of the Hogarth Press (along with her husband, Leonard Woolf), and her membership in the Bloomsbury Group, placed her at the center of British modernism in the first 40 years of the twentieth century. The form of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf's second experimental novel, makes use of focalization that is handed off like a baton in a relay between characters who hear the same sounds or view the same sights over a single day in London. In this way, the novel formally echoes the thematic balance between the intimacy of love and friendship that connects individuals with both the necessity and the ache of isolation. In her diary, Woolf wrote, "I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (Woolf 2: 248).

*Mrs. Dalloway* offers a narrative structure that employs multiple voices through which it tends also to foreground ontological issues such as "What is the mode of existence of a text? and what happens when different types of world are placed in confrontation?" (Smith 149) Focusing on the subjective individual, Søren Kierkegaard divides life into three existence spheres: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. "What he is trying to communicate through his doctrine, however, is that there are only a finite number of values in human life. So while people may live their lives, their values, systems are uniquely, distinctly tailored to their own personalities and lifestyles, there are only a limit number of fundamental values Commitments and organized ideas" (Valone 10). The relation of these three spheres to each other is hierarchical, with the individual striving to move from the esthetic, where "life is typified by the figure of dandy or seducer to ethical which is best observed in the kind of serious commitment one might make in marriage" (Abrams 215), and on to the highest stage, the religious. In the move to the religious sphere, as in *Either/Or*, "The stage is achieved when the individual personality finally chooses itself or receives itself" (Kierkegaard 181). This paper at first two parts will deal with two main characters of *Mrs. Dalloway* "Richard Dalloway" as the representative of aesthetics and "Clarissa" as the representative of ethics in this novel. Finally, the possibility of religion is to be investigated which will be divided into three parts based upon Kierkegaard's philosophy: The religious A, the Religious B and Death as the brightest point of religion.

### 2 The Aesthetic Sphere

The aesthetic life is defined by pleasures, and to live the aesthetic life to the fullest one must seek to maximize those pleasures. Francis Lescoc states that "One having no fixed principles, except that he means not to be bound to anything. He has but one desire, which is to enjoy the Sweetest of life, whether it is purely sensual Pleasure or more refined" (34). However, the aesthetic life-view is characterized by subjectivism, hedonism, and nihilism. It seeks personal pleasure, but lacks any integrating narrative or ultimate meaning. "The paradoxical round-robin of characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* creates a "ghostly" quality in the way that it applies indirect communication" (DeMeester 651). Thoughtless traditionalism and unthinking political conservatism of Richard Dalloway—as the central character of aesthetics in this novel—reveal that he is actually a ghost-of-a-man in relation to both political world and his wife. He is a man driven primarily by convention and appearances, not a man of action. Therefore, natural state of the aesthetic sphere of Richard Dalloway in this section is to be analyzed in his public and private lives and to be compared with his love rival Peter Walsh.

The first relationship to be investigated is that of Richard Dalloway in relation to the public sphere (his political life). Specifically, though one might think that Richard's position as political figure would place him in an emblematic role within the ethical sphere—the sphere associated with duty and social obligations—Richard Dalloway's thoughtless traditionalism and unthinking political conservatism reveal that he is actually a ghost-of-a-man in relation to both the political world and his wife. His lack of traction in life places him into the company of those who fail to exhibit "the courage to be as a part" (Tillich 84). He is a man driven primarily by convention and appearances, not a man of action, thus, his profession of political discourse is highly ironic. Insofar as he "shrinks from devoting [himself] to [the ethical sphere]," (Kierkegaard 112) Richard Dalloway is a character that resembles an individual who remains confined to the aesthetic sphere. This resemblance finds "representation in his public life by way of his politics tinged with self-interest" (Zwerdling 71). An example of this sort of collectivist thinking occurs when Richard Dalloway hears from Dr. Bradshaw of the suicide of Septimus Smith. Richard's response is not one of compassion toward the man or his family; Richard instead resembles one acting within the aesthetic sphere, addressing the issue by refracting it through politics: he refracts the issue through an abstract conversation about a "provision in [a] Bill...concerning the effects of shell shock," (Woolf 200) one of which is the suicide of Septimus Smith, who was a person, not an abstract effect.

With regard to the tensions within the narrative voices of the novel, Richard's distance from Septimus Smith in his tragedy stands in counter-point to his distance from Clarissa in her tragedy. Thus, Richard Dalloway's ghostly nature is represented further by his failure in the personal sphere. His spectacular moment in the novel is his failure to say "I love you" to Clarissa. Richard Dalloway's presence in the life of Clarissa and in the lives of those around him is most notable as an absence—he is a ghost-of-a-man. Julia Watkin notes, Kierkegaard believes that the person in "unconscious despair is for a time, superficially happy in a life directed toward temporal goals such as making money or achieving political power. When the goals begin to fail to satisfy, that person tries to deal with the problem as something external needing to be fixed" (Watkin 65). In the sense that he fails to see the significance of his place in the life of Clarissa, Richard Dalloway resembles the individual who in unconscious despair occupies himself with trivial details and fails to consider deeper issues relevant to the ethical-religious possibilities.

Richard thinks of telling Clarissa that he loves her, "in so many words" (Woolf 98) in reaction to his remembering Peter Walsh once having done so. His reactionary and romanticized version of Peter Walsh connects him to the person in despair who lacks of a true sense of self.

Peter Walsh! All three, Lady Bruton, Hugh Whitbread, and Richard Dalloway, remembered the same thing—how passionately Peter had been in love; been rejected; gone to India; come a cropper; made a mess of things; and Richard Dalloway had a great liking for the dear old fellow too. Milly Brush saw that; saw a depth in the brown of his eyes; saw him hesitate; consider; which interested her, as Mr. Dalloway always interested her, for what was he thinking, she wondered, about Peter Walsh? That Peter Walsh had been in love with Clarissa; that he would go back directly after lunch and find Clarissa; that he would tell her, in so many words, that he loved her. Yes, he would say that. (Woolf 115-16)

Peter Walsh has not played the role in Clarissa's everyday life that Richard has, but Richard fails to see that. Peter Walsh and Richard Dalloway are diametrically opposed characters in that Peter has been a "presence while being absent" (Kierkegaard 63) and Richard has been an "absence while being present" (Kierkegaard 63). In contrast to the security of self one experiences within the ethical sphere, Richard Dalloway's wanting to tell Clarissa that he loves her in reaction to Peter Walsh, in Kierkegaardian terms, identifies him more with characteristics of an individual who remains confined to the aesthetic sphere than with the emblematic role of a faithful husband.

In short, Kierkegaard believes that within the aesthetic sphere "What is demonic wants to shut itself up in itself and isolate itself from the threat of the good" (Watkin 63). Within the context of the personality that is limited by being confined to the aesthetic sphere, Richard's acting in resentment toward others might ultimately become a covert way of sabotaging his potential to become a concrete personality. Richard has lost his success in his both private and public lives by keeping himself in just aesthetics. He is the man of appearance not a man of action; this is what brings him failure.

### 3 The Ethical Sphere

The importance of the aesthetic is acknowledged, but it is also presented as an immature stage. "The aesthete is only concerned with his or her personal enjoyment, and because aesthetic pleasure is so fleeting, an aesthete has no solid framework from which to make coherent, consistent choices" (Cole 74). Eventually, the pleasures of the aesthetic wear thin, and one must begin seeking the ethical pleasures instead. The ethical life actually offers certain pleasures the aesthetic life cannot. The aesthetic life must be subordinated to the ethical life, as the ethical life is based on a consistent, coherent set of rules established for the good of society. Kierkegaard puts this sphere in terms of "exteriority" which relates to the external and social world. Clarissa faces paradox with regard to the limit of the ethical sphere of existence, by serving as the mediating point in the contrasting roles of the other primary characters.

Most significant of these contrasts is her double-bladed relationship to Peter Walsh, her adventurous suitor, and Richard, her less-than-adventurous suitor-then-husband. In moving beyond "defining herself narrowly in relation to limitations set forth by her earlier rejection of Peter Walsh or her marriage to Richard Dalloway" (Schiff 371), Clarissa acts as one who chooses herself within the context of Kierkegaard's ethical sphere; she recognizes that she is not "Mrs. Dalloway", nor is she the interpretation of herself into which she is tempted to fall in reaction to her declining health. "She stands in the position of the individual who faces the existential limit of her interpretation of self" (Henke 384). She faces a situation similar to the individual who confronts the limit of the ethical sphere and the finite nature of human existence, and she thus reaches a

place where an individual might embrace the possibility of making a leap to faith that takes shape within the religious sphere.

In resembling one who has reached the limit of Kierkegaard's ethical sphere, Clarissa also confronts the double-bladed nature of her relationship to both Sally Seton of the past (While she was young) and Sally Seton of the present (at her present age). Sally Seton of the past represents the Romantic escapism characteristic of Kierkegaard's aesthetic sphere, in other words, "Sally Seton symbolizes for Clarissa what she never had the courage to become" (Cui 179). In a way that resembles Judge William's exhorting the aesthete of *Either/Or II* to embrace the existentially rewarding responsibilities that life within the ethical sphere might offer, the idealized Sally Seton of the past is disrupted as the real Sally Seton re-enters Clarissa's life. Sally Seton of the present has "five sons and is a married woman in her fifties, Lady Rosseter, wife of an industrialist (Woolf 204). Sally Seton of the past, this ghostly memory to which Clarissa retreats on occasion, represents Clarissa's failure to find lasting meaning within her occasional retreats to the aesthetic sphere. Sally Seton of the present, on the other hand, is, for Clarissa, a metaphor for personality associated with the responsibilities of motherhood— with facing one's place within the ethical sphere of existence. Such an example of a connection with the ethical might lead Clarissa naturally to thoughts of Elizabeth Dalloway, Clarissa's link to the future.

Lastly, Clarissa must face the double-bladed nature of her interpretation of self in relation to Septimus Smith. This too brings her symbolically to the limit of the ethical sphere in that she identifies herself with Septimus when she learns that he has just died:

Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced herself to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She wanted success. Lady Bexborough and the rest of it [...]. (Woolf 202)

Clarissa, in thinking that she was "never wholly admirable" (Woolf 202) and in identifying herself with Septimus Smith's finitude, paradoxically, faces a situation similar to the individual who, in Kierkegaard's schema, confronts her own limit within the ethical sphere of existence. For Kierkegaard, recognition of guilt before the Eternal—the limit of the ethical sphere—is ultimately a gift of God's grace. Kierkegaard believes that "Man is guilty, but he is also redeemed from this guilt" (Hubben 48).

In brief, Clarissa connects the sense of duty and obligation, characteristic of the ethical sphere, to the beauty and precious moments of life, but this connection arises from her recognition that, soon enough, life will have passed. Double-bladed nature of her interpretation of self in relation to Sally Seton of the past and present and Septimus brings her symbolically to the limitations of the ethical sphere.

### 4 The Religious Sphere

Kierkegaard considers the religious life to be the highest plane of existence. The religious sphere is the relationship between God and an individual standing before God. According to Kierkegaard, the religious sphere is divided into Religiousness A and B. Religiousness A applies to the individual who feels a sense of guilt before God. Religiousness B is transcendental in nature. Finally, with paradoxical optimism, Kierkegaard sees "death for the Christian as the point at which God's light shines brightest" (Webb 287). *Mrs. Dalloway* symbolically represents the limitations of the ethical sphere and the limitations of what Kierkegaard refers to as Religiousness A. Based upon Kierkegaard's belief, a good person, such as Clarissa cannot arrive at the salvation under her own power. In this section, finally, the possible existence of religiousness in the characters

will be analyzed based upon the three layers of religion mentioned above.

"Kierkegaard believes that Religiousness A involves an individual striving toward concrete actualization of self within the context of a primordial choice that prefers good to evil and that acknowledges the place of at least one other individual" (Pattison 174). For Kierkegaard, the limitations of the ethical sphere imply the need for a leap to faith that extends beyond these limitations, a leap to faith that takes shape within the religious sphere. Septimus Smith's wife Rezia arguably represents also the limit of Kierkegaard's ethical sphere's duty and responsibility, in that she acts nobly in terms of Religiousness A but ultimately fails to prevent Septimus from committing suicide. In Kierkegaard's view, it is only the leap to faith that takes shape within the religious sphere that ultimately overcomes the overwhelming power of death and the dread associated with recognizing one's finitude. For Kierkegaard, whose ultimate concern is what it means to be a Christian in Christendom, "God's grace is the way by which the individual in faith ultimately finds victory over the power of death" (Shaffer 191).

On the other hand, Religiousness B—which Kierkegaard identifies specifically with Christianity—involves the individual accepting God's grace, involves her or him accepting that "The individual's inability to fulfill the ethical demand requires God's saving grace and forgiveness" (Watkin 79). Clarissa sees herself as somehow connected with Septimus Smith, and he represents for her a powerful symbol of the power of death, while he also serves as a compliment to her concept of the self in dissipation. For Kierkegaard, such a recognition by the individual of the personality's need to ultimately identify passionately with something that transcends self might ultimately offer an opportunity—though it is not realized in Clarissa's case—for the leap to faith that takes shape in the religious sphere.

Lastly, like the phenomenon of freedom from which human self-consciousness and human recognition of the inevitability of death arises, the phenomenon of death transcends self in an archetypal sense: It is impossible to avoid the archetypal nature of death in that death confronts all individuals. With paradoxical optimism, Kierkegaard sees death for the Christian as the point at which God's light shines brightest: In a journal entry from 1844, Kierkegaard remarks, "There is a beautiful expression which the common man uses about dying: that God or our Lord 'brightens' for him" (107). Although death is a potentially ugly physical reality—as becomes gruesomely apparent in the suicide of Septimus Smith (Woolf 200)—Kierkegaard sees death for the Christian as being the point at which God shines brightest.

To sum up, Kierkegaard believes that a good person, such as Clarissa, cannot in the context of what it means to be a Christian ultimately arrive at salvation under her own power; what it means to be a Christian in Christendom is to ultimately make an appeal to God's grace. Therefore, the religious sphere of Kierkegaard also suggests that sticking himself to this sphere, human being faces several limitations, which cannot guarantee his success and salvation.

## 5 Conclusion

*Mrs. Dalloway* is Woolf's first successful experimental novel, in which she achieves radical transformation of her novelistic art in the light of her own theory of novel as she stated in her essay, "Modern Fiction: the depiction of myriads of impressions, a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope," and the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall [...] however, disconnected and incoherent in appearance" (Woolf 105). In the era of competitive experimentation, alongside Joyce and Proust, Woolf shapes her novelistic art in accordance with her own individualistic aesthetics and succeeds in dismantling the traditional novel as it was handed down to her by eliminating the "Scaffolding and bricks of conventional plot and the 'effort of breaking with strict representationalism'" (Woolf

313). Focusing on the issue of existence, Woolf tries to suggest her own situation in her novel by characterizing several people.

This study was an attempt to analyze *Mrs. Dalloway* from the perspective of Søren Kierkegaard as a forerunner scholar in theory of Existentialism. This study was divided into three parts of "the aesthetic sphere", "the ethical sphere" and "the religious sphere." In the first two parts of this paper, Richard and Clarissa as the representative of aesthetic sphere and ethical sphere, respectively, were analyzed. In the last part of this study, the religious sphere was applied to two characters Rezia, as the representative of Religious A, and Clarissa, as the representative of Religious B and finally, death, as the final layer of religious sphere was applied in general. The outcome suggests the limitations of each sphere for human being. Furthermore, this study shows that the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* cannot get any salvation by focusing on just one sphere and overlooking the others spheres.

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