

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIFE AND DEATH IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS DALLOWAY*

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### **Abstract:**

The course of Time in *Mrs Dalloway* is divided into inner time (psychological time) and clock time (mechanical one). The first is a kind of flow (flux): the past lives in the present, in memory and even in fantasies; in its consequences it shapes the future as well. So, the action moves backward and forward freely in a single day in the life of Mrs Dalloway in London in all its contestations, ambiguity and heterogeneity. It is also emotionally limited to the relationships of the heroine with other people and her mind ranges without any limitations of time and discursive spaces, from London to her girlhood at Bourton and back again to London. We move from the consciousness of Mrs Dalloway to the consciousness of Septimus, Rezia, Peter Walsh, Doris Kilman and others.

But Mrs Dalloway's character has been closely integrated with her world, with her society which is spiritually hollow, usually based on false assumptions leading to the death of the soul. The study conveys a sense of impending disaster not only lurking beneath the outside world (London) but also in Mrs Dalloway's private and social life. The result of her sociability with her evening party ends up with her identification with Septimus' soul. This duality, this fluctuation, exposes much of Mrs Woolf's life and her death (suicide). Also, the study's concern is with the other characters whose fears and anxieties are interwoven with utopian fantasies and dreams, the crown of which is seemingly of that identification and that duality.

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"*The Hours*" was the first suggested title, but *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)<sup>1</sup> is thus entitled later. This novel is often referred to as the first chronicle the rise and demise of the woman character. It is also considered as a bridgework between *Jacob's Room* (1920) and *To the Lighthouse* (1926). Therefore, the novel at hand is as closely akin narratively and thematically to these two novels. Both of them tackle the concept of human existence, though they grip different locales and time occurrence. They delineate the characters as radically pliable as Mrs Dalloway. The heroine, as Virginia Woolf forms here, is shown as reaching the

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moment or moments of tremendous insight at the time when she perceives life as that "luminous halo". Henceforth, Virginia affirms it to be so. True, Mrs Dalloway unfolds a concern which extends more or less six hours; that is why the novel at that time was entitled "*The Hours*". Yet, it is needed central to Mrs Woolf's own life.: her neurosis, frustration and suicide. Mrs Dalloway was originally to kill herself or merely to die at the end of the party. By contrast, however, the period from 1936 to 1941 Mrs Woolf was almost alone and frustrated and spent one of the darkest phase of her life. It is thus found reflected in her novel. According to Warren Beck, Mrs Woolf was burdened by "the vague frustrate desire, the dreamy sense of impotence and the morbid death-wish"<sup>2</sup>. He also argues that her "awareness of mutation and specialization in the mind's response to environment"<sup>3</sup> is reflected in such fictional themes as life-wish as against death-wish, Beck, again, suggests that her "subjective individualism and social order"<sup>4</sup> in her novel occurs in the character of the burdened Clarissa Dalloway. But Frank W. Bradbrook emphasizes that her concern with the meaning of destiny and life ... had been characteristic of Virginia Woolf's own fiction from the first"<sup>5</sup>. In addition, David Daiches focuses on the concept of death as "the only ultimate solution, since in death one went out of the prison of self and became part of everything"<sup>6</sup>. Here, the medium adopted by the novelist is the novel. It is in here, as Mrs Woolf affirms in *Granite and Rainbow* (1956), that "the novel is a gift bringing us into close touch with life"<sup>7</sup>, and here metaphorical language is employed as an avenue of artistic expression. As might be admitted, all Mrs Woolf's postulations indicate ontological insecurity or rather a symbolic restatement of the existential situation.

However, Mrs Woolf broke away from the traditional technique and plot employed by the Edwardian novelists like H.G. Wells (1866-1946), John Galsworthy (1867-1933) and Arnold Bennett(1867-1931). Their materialistic tendency so far enhanced by them reveals life as if it were limelight of facts. Life, Mrs Woolf argues

here, "is not a series of giglamps symmertrically arranged, but 'a luminous halo' a semi-transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."<sup>9</sup> The novelist with much higher sensibility determined to try out a new technique but not of her invention. Such a device, the stream of consciousness, is quite different from the "interior monologue", which was adopted by the French novelist, Eduoard Dujardin(1861-1949). He defines it as a device for "the direct introduction of the reader into the interior life of a character without any intervention in the way of explanation or commentary on the part of the author."<sup>10</sup> But Mrs Woolf seems to have worked hard on the thought stream of the character within the texture of the novel. She often feels anxious to "indicate

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to the reader a certain necessary connection between one part of a reverie and the next".<sup>11</sup>

Further, she intends to make her novel corroborate a certain standpoint about the character's life and to edit the thought process, giving it internal organization and pattern, selecting, commenting, rephrasing<sup>12</sup>, simply because her technique does not contain intellectual and moral implication only, but it discovers them as well.<sup>13</sup> To amalgamate what she strives to capture a single shape (or envisagement) that is structured into sequence so as to comprise the whole of Mrs Dalloway, with some perspective at last filled with changing aspects of configuration that Mrs Woolf shapes and gathers under pervasive urgency. Such urgency is so often sustained by her insight and skill. From this point, she maintains such a case by writing thus: "it is this that is frightening and exciting in amidst of my profound gloom, depression, boredom, whatever it is. One sees a fine passing far out. Here in few minutes that remain, I must record ... the end of *The Waves*(1931) ... I have netted that fin in the waste of water which appeared to me over the marshes out of my window at Rodmell when I was coming to an end of *To the Lighthouse*."<sup>14</sup> In this respect, David Daiches reports that "in *Mrs Dalloway* Virginia Woolf achieved the sensitive organization of tenuous insights which she had earlier come to consider the function of the novelist. The significant moments in experience are the moments of insight. ..."<sup>15</sup> This is indeed compatible with her novelistic mold and postulation on the essence of life and death as being human possibilities.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, a little early in the morning, mid-June, 1919, with life full of roars and fanfares or chimes here and there, Clarissa Dalloway, so sensitive, so social, and contemplative, sets off an errand to buy some flowers from Miss Pym, the florist, for her party that will be held the same evening. Lucy, her maid, is left supervising the mending of the door hinges. Here, the reader comes to see what will be within her mind. Mrs Dalloway, at the age of fifty-one now, is able to live as freely as she possibly can. She would like living in the country. Hence, she remembers, a girl at the age of eighteen, as part of her earlier experience at Bourton, that it is better to plunge into the open air: "[h]ow fresh, how calm, stiller than this"(p.5). From the start, the aim of the recollection of this event, among others, is convey Mrs Dalloway's past life, for some functions of the *self* endure through time, and the stream of consciousness serves to "clarify or render intelligible both the element of duration in time and the aspect of an enduring self."<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Mrs Dalloway wishes to "have had her life over again"(p.13). Suffering from symptoms of illness all over her over-fiftish face, she feels unspeakably aged and "sliced like a knife through everything"(pp.10-11). Again, Mrs Dalloway walks through life; she is inside her body

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could only exist between women, between  
women just grown up.(p.39; Italics mine).

Sally,too, loses her temper, flares up and tells Sir Hugh Whitbread, the old acquaintance of the Dalloways, that he has "represented all that was most detestable in British middle-class life"(p.81). So, Mrs Dalloway and Sally Seton are involved in such fluctuation of impulse as to show a clear-cut essence of human consciousness, for the external and internal impulses flow together. It is description or sensory debris or meditation combines as Mrs Dalloway serves her guests at the party later. Each character's 'otherness' determines his/her place in the other lives.<sup>19</sup> Mrs Dalloway's love for Peter is first confirmed throughout the first pages, but it diminishes later. She knows what kind of man Peter has been. The novelist, however, might be able to tell and show what life feels like. She suggests that the sensitive to the feelings of others, that is why she has new reason to give the significance of life, by instinct and trial on the psychological level, to new arrangement of language.<sup>20</sup> Her novel's concern is not with her concept of 'scatology', like James Joyce's (1882-1941) especially in *Ulysses*(1922); its range is about the depth of life, as Anne Cluysenaar argues:

Virginia Woolf often writes as if a single  
force were sometimes capable of blending  
the disparate elements of existence into a whole.  
She develops individual techniques that suit  
her world-view.<sup>21</sup>

Further, she learned from Henry James (1843-1961) more of life she always cried for, and her emphasis on fuller life is similar to that that of Henry James, "from whom in part she learned it"<sup>22</sup>, on one hand, on the other, her readers can understand that, as though by nature, Clarissa Dalloway thinks of death as well. She meditates upon how she continues living after death:

It ended in a transcendental theory which,  
with her horror of death, allowed her to believe  
(for all her skepticism), that since our apparition

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the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death. Perhaps-perhaps(p.169).

Here, Mrs Dalloway seems to have satisfied, but not completely. The philosopher Martin Heidegger's (1898-1974) statement to the effect emphasizes that "we live *towards death* (that is, we live to die) ; it is only half the story of the contingency and transiency of our being".<sup>23</sup> But what, in this sense, makes one's life, like Mrs Dalloway's, unbearable is the *Angst* or care or ennui springing from the boring influence of other people: Mrs Dalloway has often a profound sense of ennui, which now and again fostered by Peter's(" 'sharing' as intimacy not only in a sexual sense,... with Peter everything had to be shared"(p.10). Also, in digging for her most secret

depths of her soul, whilst the intimacy between Clarissa and Richard (her husband) has been the most faithful and compassionate. Again, Lady Millicent Bruton, their friend is too negligent of her invitation; she invites only Richard.

Moreover, the effacement of the novelist like Virginia Woolf between World Wars I and II gave rise to the method in which moral indecision was hidden. Yet, Mrs Woolf so often tried hard to show, especially in *Mrs Dalloway*, moral judgment. She emphasized the uncertainty of such judgment in life. Pertinent to this point, Mrs Woolf writes of Mrs Dalloway's hatred for Miss Kilman, the tutor of her daughter Elizabeth, whose uncertainties of the above-mentioned judgment are here obvious. Doris Kilman becomes her rival – a rival ready to devour Elizabeth in the same way as she is ready to eat up "that cake – the pink one... the pleasure of eating was almost the only pleasure left her"(p.144). Greedy and brutal as Miss Kilman (her name sounds the word 'killer') seems to be, she likes to possess Elizabeth as well : "she had got Elizabeth"(p.142). She is really voluble about wealth, trying to be the same version of unctuous middle class. She is certainly Elizabeth's captor. What drives Mrs Dalloway to hate Miss Kilman is that she is still ill, a woman of pale, smooth mien and Elizabeth represents 'youth', the core of liveliness and the link of her mother. In this respect, William Wordsworth maintains such a concept in one of his Lucy poems. He writes of Lucy as a thing that could not feel the touch of earthly years mainly because:

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.<sup>24</sup>

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On the ontological level, however, life of Mrs Dalloway is almost captured by other people. The statements mentioned so far are used to manifest how far she is forced to mull over all her grief, hopes, fears and anguish or ennui. In *Roger Fry*, an autobiographical book, Mrs Woolf states that "in order to create, unconsciousness is necessary"<sup>25</sup>, but she sometimes renders reality merely as she finds it impinging upon her characters' consciousness. E.M. Forster comes into line with her on this matter when he confirms that "Life is such a muddle ... the will is so weak, the sensations fidgety".<sup>26</sup> As might be expected, he reaffirms that "the hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer ... [and] has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source".<sup>27</sup> At this point, the heroine (Mrs Dalloway) lives two kinds of life. The first is found in the busy living on London streets where she is heading towards the florist and the second is lived out in her house where she finds her husband as a source of protection. But it seems that the "coldness" of the house resembles that of death: her house, in a metaphorical image, is as "cool as vault"(p.201).

Hence, Mrs Woolf gives her readers a manifest and significant concept of death-in-life atmosphere there. Her heroine has faced many incidents of a day in her life whether in her house or on London streets. These incidents are accompanying many impressions: mental, visual and emotional.

Intent on preparing for her birthday party in the evening, She is *outwardly* calm, but *inwardly* "she had a sudden spasm, as if, while she mused, the icy claws had the chance to fix in her(p.41). On the threshold of middle age, Mrs Dalloway has embraced the sense of life's essence, driving the reader, as if on purpose, to think of the quality of life itself. Here, one realizes the difference between "reality" and "appearance". Indeed, in her atheistic mode, Mrs Dalloway considers "love and religion" detestable. Love and religion are "the cruelest things in the world"(p.140), partly because they are the embodiment of Doris Kilman's dominating character: she is able to see them" clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous *dressed up in a machintosh coat*"(p.140;Italics mine). Kilman, then, as thus described, is a 'sanctimonious predator'; whereas Mrs Dalloway, by contrast, is fairly orderly, having "her social instinct"(p.69), a woman of wealth and sociability. Thus, she has behaved with regularity as if she were "a nun withdrawing or a child exploring a tower"(p.35). In this sense, Mrs Woolf gives her readers a full image of Mrs Dalloway's *appearance* as a nun for her regular acts, her cleanliness and whiteness outside and inside her house. Let us see what she is doing here:

She ... came to the bathroom. There was the green linoleum

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and tap dripping. There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. Women must put off their rich apparel. At mid-day they must disrobe. She pierced the pincushion and laid her feathered yellow hat on the bed. The sheets were clean, tight, stretched in a white band from side to side(p.35).

Mrs Dalloway is inclined to be away from the bustling goings-on of life, to be all alone in "an attic room", like a nun with white, clean robe. But she is a lady of religion; she is an atheist; that is to say, she believes in what she always says that "the atheist's religion [is] doing good for the sake of goodness"(p.87). So, the nun-like picture, as shown above, is rather ironic. It conveys the difference between that *reality* and that *appearance*. In other words, Mrs Dalloway is seen as being "orderly", "perfect hostess" and "rich"(p.60), as being a character full of fears and suspicion. This is, in fact, the "doubleness" of her personality or, say the two dimensions of her life. Life, much like the green silk of her dress she would mend, seems to be like the green folds of waves collecting, overbalancing and falling.

Further, Clarissa Dalloway lives her life spiritually and her spiritual life unfolds not only within the fabric of bunches of flowers or bustling of the physical world as in Bond street, Hartley street or Victoria street, but it also stands against the realm of social facades. Thus, she is walking in these places (streets) through life and inside her body. She is a part from life and alien to her body.

Her aging body is but a thing that she "wears". This heroine, as a complex character, wants to be less feminine, yet more masculine. This is the duality of her personality in the psychological sense.

Of the passage of time, London is "a veiled microcosm" ... ,and *Mrs Dalloway* depicts the dimension of time.<sup>28</sup> Almost time and space are considered relative on the psychological and mathematical levels.<sup>29</sup> Also, the rhythm of the years, hours, minutes, and seconds conforms to the needs of all characters in *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Waves* (1931); the passing of time is indicated by the chiming of Big Ben or the bells of Wren churches at fifteen-minute intervals, which are heard by all the characters. In one focus, the background material within the limits of time is brought in precisely when needed, in snippets, in flashes of recollection, rather than in formally and solidly fashioned flashbacks.<sup>30</sup> The back-and-forth narrative, the thought about the *present*, the *past* and the *present* again, the in-and-out current noise, the bustling streets and quiet other places have suggested the rhythm of the waves – their ebbs and tides. Mrs Woolf envisages the scene as a whole thus:

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Such undulation resembles the hovering and diving of the "rooks": ... that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling. So, the hours pass one after the other like waves booming from Big Ben: first a warning musical; then, the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria street(pp. 5-6).

To Mrs Dalloway, life now and then builds up, fumbles every moment and creates afresh very much like waves. In *The Waves*, the reader can find the movement of the wave similar to these hours in *Mrs Dalloway*: "The waves broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore. One after another they massed themselves and fell; the spray tossed itself back with the energy of their fall".<sup>31</sup> The heroine Rhoda in *The Waves* kills herself.

Of the sense of Time and death-wish, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, an ex-soldier suffering from the delayed effects of shell-shock during the war, have much in common. Septimus, in comparison with Mrs Dalloway, cannot protect his soul. She is now right not to marry Peter Walsh; instead, she married Richard Dalloway to protect hers. Septimus, before his suicide, taken away to asylum, writes about his sense of revulsion against the fears caused by Dr Holmes: "Holmes came regularly everyday. Once you stumble ... human nature is on you, Holmes is on you"(p.102). Here, Septimus is frightened of loneliness; Dr Holmes demands his soul, but he cannot. So, Septimus jumps down to keep, through death, the privacy of himself just the same as Clarissa Dalloway has been inclined to keep hers away from Peter Walsh or Lady Burton or Doris Kilman. By virtue of the ideas of life and death (life-force and death-wish), so often coming together as two types of forces within the minds of Mrs Dalloway and Septimus, Mrs Dalloway begins "speculating on life and death and time," David Daiches argues, "she has a fleeting sense of identity with the *suicide*. This identification of Mrs Dalloway with a young man whom she had never known and whom she hears of for the first time only after he is dead...."<sup>32</sup> Sir William

Bradshaw, the pompous specialist, whose mishandling of Septimus' mental disorder has resulted in this end, comes to Mrs Dalloway's party and tells her of Septimus' fate. Hence, Sir William, among others, more than once, disturbs Septimus. He is the product of spiritual apathy, of the brute weight of non-awareness that afflicts every world, old and modern:

Naked, defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless  
received the impress of Sir William's will. He swooped;

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he devoured. He shut people up. It was this combination of decision and humanity the endeared Sir William so greatly to the relations of his victims( p.113).

One of his victims, then, is Septimus. As a psychiatrist, Sir William tries to dissect a deranged mind, like that of Septimus', ignoring pity and intuition but worshipping authority and power. Septimus leaps to his death; therefore, he has defeated time and reality by his madness (or insanity). Both Septimus and his Italian wife Lurezia feel alienated from each other. Both are lonely and isolated from the world. This is the world created by Virginia Woolf of life and death. In their isolation, Lurezia cannot understand Septimus. There is no moment of peace for them, and Sir William has disappointed them: he "was not a nice man", for "he had failed them"(p.109). Mrs Woolf writes in her *Diary* that "peace is dissolved into the light of common day".<sup>33</sup> Thus, death is imminent in life but not transcendent. The moment of death in the novel is assigned to Mrs Dalloway; but, here, she identifies herself with Septimus. She dies victoriously with him, not he with her. This "identification", as Daiches argues, "is not an arbitrary piece of plot resolution; it arises from the underlying view of experience as a unified flux."<sup>34</sup> Quentin Bell states that Virginia Woolf, within a year or thereabouts, "was struck by the third of bouts of madness. In September, 93, she tried to kill herself."<sup>35</sup>

With Mrs Woolf and Mrs Dalloway, there is an intensity of sensibility – a sensibility that might be labeled as a mystical atheism or transfiguration of death – the author died by drowning herself in the river Ouse, 1941.

To conclude, we have to say that the novel *Mrs Dalloway* as a whole, among others, tackles the dissolution of experience into clear-cut insights. It represents a broader view of life when the main characters try to get their moments of insights within the range of life as "luminous halo", and death is only a means of unification with others.

### NOTES

1 Virginia Woolf : *Mrs Dalloway* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969).

2 Warren Beck : "For Virginia Woolf" in *Forms in Modern Fiction*; ed. W.V. O'Connor (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1964), p.320; *passim*.

3 Ibid.

4 Frank W. Bradbrook: "Virginia Woolf: The Theory and Practice of Fiction" in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* ; ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p.260.

5 Ibid.

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- 6 David Daiches: *Virginia Woolf* (London: Editions Poetry: 1945),p.45.
- 7 Woolf *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press,1965),p.56.
- 8 Henry James: *The Future of the Novel* ;ed. Leon Edel (New York: Vintage Books, 1956),p.26.
- 9 Woolf : *Granite and Rainbow*,p.61.
- 10 Rene Wellek and Austin Warren : *The Theory of Literature* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine Books,1963;rpt. 1966),p.224.
- 11 Daiches : *Virginia Woolf* ,p. 76.
- 12 E.M. Forster : *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books,1985),p.39.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Quoted by Elmer Borklund in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (London: St. James Press,1977),p.543.
- 15 Daiches : *Virginia Woolf*,p. 77.
- 16 Ibid., p.65.
- 17 Quentin Bell "Introduction" to *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (Harmondsworth:Penguin Books,1977),p. xiii.  
Ibid., p. xiv.
- 19 Carl Woodring: *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press,1966),p.32.
- 20 Ibid., p.41.
- 21 Anne Clysenaar : *Introduction to Literary Stylistics* (London: B.T. Bats Ford,1976),p.84.
- 22 Woodring : *Virginia Woolf*,p.4.
- 23 Aurto B. Fallico : *Art and Existentialism* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962),p.78.
- 24 William Wordsworth: *Short Poems* (London: J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd.,1909; rpt. 1934)p.50.
- 25 Woolf : *Roger Fry : A Biography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books,1979),p.210.
- 26 Forster : *Aspects of the Novel*,p.35.
- 27 Ibid.,pp.55-6.
- 28 Woodring : *Virginia Woolf* ,p.36.
- 29 Ibid.,p.6.
- 30 Philip Freund : *The Art of Reading the Novel* (N.J.: Collier,1966),p.1
- 31 Woolf : *The Waves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books,1964),p.128.
- 32 Daiches: *Virginia Woolf*,p.68.
- 33 Woolf : *The Diary* ,p.217.
- 34 Daiches : *Virginia Woolf*,p.77.  
Bell : "Introduction" to *The Diary*,

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## قيمة الحياة والموت في رواية المسس دالوي لفرجينيا وولف

### الخلاصة

يفسم مجرى الزمن في رواية السيده دالوي الى زمن داخلي و زمن ميكانيكي فالأول نوع من سريان (تدفق) الماضي يكمن في الحاضر و الذكرى وحتى النزوات الفنتازيه. ففي مجرياتها يشكل الزمن المستقبل كذلك. وعليه، فأن الحدث يتحرك ذهابا وايابا حرا في يوم واحد في حياة السيده دالوي في لندن بكل نزاعاتها وغموضها ومتغيرها. و عاطفيا أيضا يتحدد بعلاقات البطله بالناس فذهنها لا يحده حدود الزمن و لا فضاءات(اماكن) منتقله من لندن الى عالما لصبايا في بيرتن والعودة الى لندن ونحن بدورنا نتجول في وعي السيده دالوي الى وعي سبتيمس و ريزيا و بيتر و ليش و دوريس كيلمان و آخرين.

بيد أن شخصية دالوي تتكامل مع عالمها و مع مجتمعها الآجوف روحيا يؤسس على افتراضات واهيه تقضي الى موت الروح فالدراسة تحمل في طياتها احساسا بكارثة وشيكة ليست كامنة تحت العالم الخارجي(لندن) وانما في حياة السيده دالوي الاجتماعييه و الخاصه و نتيجة هذه المجاملات الاجتماعييه ومع حفلاتها المسائية تنتهي بتقمص وتلبيس روح الجندي السابق ستتيمس. تلك الأزواجيه،ذلك التذبذب يعرض جوانب كثيره من حياة الروائيه فيرجينيا وولف و انتحارها وكذتك من مهام الدراسة هو تناول الشخصيات الأخرى بمخاوفهم و قلقهم(ارهاصاتهم)التي تتواشج مع نزواتهم (فنتازياتهم) الطوبائيه واحلامهم يتوجهها و يعتليها ذلك التلبس و تلك الأزواجيه.