

Spatial Forms of Time and Gender Politics in Mrs. Dalloway

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Abstract

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel with time as the theme, but it has obvious spatial forms. Woolf presents two kinds of gender time in his novel: progressive and linear male time and non-linear female time that interrogates subject consciousness. The former binds the life time of the main characters in the whirlpool of male consciousness, while the latter attempts to break the suppression of linear time. The spatial forms in the novel are mainly composed of direct narration and reverse narration and the juxtaposition of different characters' life time rhythms. The author believes that Woolf's novel form is closely related to her thinking on women's self-consciousness. She outlines the life prospect of women through writing. In the novel **Mrs. Dalloway**, Woolf reveals the oppression of individuals and the collective by the male linear time through the spatial forms of time such as the synchronization of flashback and linear narration and the juxtaposition of life time rhythms of different characters, representing the stagnant and closed living state of the characters within the male historical time. At the same time, Woolf shows the implosion, rebirth and continuity of women's life time itself and presents women's implicit or explicit gender politics. By setting up the reflection of two generations of women on their own life courses, Woolf shows their courage and determination to break through the limits of the male linear time and their determination to participate in it.

Keywords

Mrs. Dalloway, spatial forms of the theme of time, gender politics.

1. Introduction

Space is closely related to gender. Women have long been considered to belong to private space, such as houses, bedrooms, kitchens and attics, while men have been taken for granted to belong to open and public space such as living rooms, offices and courts, which deeply affected the self-realization of men as well as women. Because of this kind of spatial arrangement, men gained more opportunities to realize their potential while women's self-actualization was constrained to the limited space of home.

However, with the awakening of western women's consciousness, women begin to reflect on their own life time and subjectivity and break through the limit of private space and realize their value in public space.

Most of the characters in **Mrs. Dalloway** are females. The novel is about how **Mrs. Dalloway** prepares for a party that is attended by the upper class. The time jumps from the past and the present and the narrative line runs with the flowing consciousness of the characters. Up to now, scholars have mainly analyzed female consciousness, homosexuality, war trauma, death and the space of country in the novel. Although there are scholars who have already paid attention to the time in the novel, no one has analyzed the gender politics behind the spatial form of time in the novel. **Mrs. Dalloway** has obvious spatial forms. Woolf presents two kinds of gender time in his novel: the "progressive" linear male time in the Victorian age and the non-linear female time that poses challenges to the former one. The former one binds the life time of the main

characters in the whirlpool of male consciousness, while the latter attempts to break the suppression of the male linear time. The spatial forms in the novel are mainly reflected by the alternating use of direct narration and reverse narration and the juxtaposition of different characters' life time rhythms which enable readers to have a spatialized reading effect, and the in-depth exploration of the moment of female characters' life time which increases the thickness of characters' life time.

Woolf's novel forms are closely related to her thinking on women's self-consciousness. She outlines the life prospect of women through writing. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf reveals the oppression of individuals and the collective by the male linear time in the Victorian age through the spatial forms of time such as the synchronization of reverse narration and linear narration and the juxtaposition of life time rhythms of different characters, representing the stagnant and closed living state of the characters in the Victorian age. At the same time, Woolf shows the implosion, rebirth and continuity of women's life time itself and presents women's implicit or explicit gender politics through having an in-depth exploration of the time moment of female characters. The reverse narration enables the female characters in the novel to recollect their past and offers them a way to run away from the present. By setting up the reflection of two generations of women on their own life courses, Woolf shows their courage and determination to break through the limits of the male linear time and their determination to participate in it.

2. The Male Time

The creators of western industrialization and capitalism in the Victorian age were mainly males. Such kind of system and social condition has shaped the perception of time that people have. During the 20th century when the Victorian age arrived at its heyday, masculinity was relatively strong and the time was dominated by reason which was often considered as a symbol of men. The society developed in a linear form with the progress of science and economy. With the progress of civilization, the time is always "progressing" linearly. However, the "progress" of the male time is always based on the sacrifices of the other—including women, the lower class and others. In fact, there are some representations of the male time in English literature. For example, in *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Robinson Crusoe colonizes the island, names one barbarian as Friday, and starts his colonization of the island, thus implanting historical time in the pure time of the island. "Friday", as a time mark, has great significance. In *Heart of Darkness*, westerners' exploitation of the labor and raw materials of Africa involve the Africans in the "progress" of western industrialization. Industrial society is a more advanced social form compares to the agricultural age and it attaches great importance to time. In *Howards End*, Henry Wilcox and Charles Wilcox, as the elites of the middle class, pay great attention to the time efficiency of work and ignore the harm they do to other people. Many labors are exploited by them and they try to squeeze the most value from them. These examples in British literature show that the linear male time has long dominated the life of "the other" and the influence of the linear male time is greatest during the Victorian age.

However, in the river of history, the voice of females was seldom heard. Woolf once complained, "British history is always about the male one, not about the female one. About our fathers we always know something about him. He was excellent and he was an infantry or a navy soldier. He held an official position or made law. However, about our mother, our grandmother or our great grandmother, what is left? Besides their names, the date of their wedding or the number of children they have, we know nothing about them"¹. Women lived in the expectation of men for them to be a good mother and a good wife. They were limited to the private space like

¹ Virginia Woolf: *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* (China Radio Film & TV Press, China 2000), trans. Liu Binshan and Zhai Shijing, p.366.

kitchens, bedrooms or attics. The contributions they made have always been taken for granted. Besides, they lacked the opportunity to create their own value in the public space owing to their physiological and psychological disadvantages compared to men.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf has employed the spatial forms of time to represent gender politics. The spatial forms include the alternating use of direct narration and reverse one, the juxtaposition of different life rhythms and the in-depth exploration of the life moment of female characters. Through reading the novel, readers gain a strong spatialized effect and they can find the life time of the female characters under the weak linear narrative line. These forms have been used to reveal the suppression of the male linear time on individuals including males and females and the absurdity of the time. Woolf has also represented two generations of women in the novel to show the imperfectness of one generation in the realization of their value or potential and the real possibility of the other or the next generation in realizing their own value.

3. The Suppression of the Male Time on the Other

In order to keep the capitalist time of the British Empire progressing linearly, individuals and the collective become its victim. Women, as the "angels" of the house, are anxious about the passing of time since their value is mainly evaluated on their reproduction ability which is closely related to time. Once they lose the ability because of aging, they will face great anxiety. Men become the victims of the British Empire in its pursuit of maintaining its position in the world. The one who tries to challenge the flowing of the linear progressing time will be listed under the name of madness and illness.

In the novel, Woolf represents 7 different stages of the female characters including 18-year-old Elizabeth, Rezia Smith who is in her twenties, Milly Brush and Doris Kilman who are past 40 years old, Clarissa and Sally Seton who are in their fifties, 62-year-old Millicent Bruton, Miss Helena Parry who is past 80. There is also a nameless old woman Clarissa sees from her window. The female life cycle represents the youth, maturity and aging of women. Like flowers, they are going through or will go through the aging or the withering in their life. What worth mentioning is that in the novel, Woolf frequently associates flowers with women. For example, at the very beginning of the novel, "Mrs. Dalloway said that she would buy the flowers herself"². Elizabeth is described as a hyacinth; Peter associates blue hydrangea with Sally; Richard buys roses for his wife. The image of flowers implies the decorative function of women in these men's eyes. Like flowers, they would wither one day. Once their youth and beauty fades and vanishes, their value will be reduced. The loss of reproduction ability and youth puts women under great anxiety. Mrs. Dalloway often reads the monologue in Cymbeline, "Fear no more the heat o' the sun nor the furious winter's rages". The sun is often considered as the symbol of youth and sexuality and the winter is a symbol of aging and death. Through reading it, Mrs. Dalloway seems to try to alleviate the fear and anxiety brought by the passing of time and the reducing of energy. She experiences the changes brought by the passing of time and the anxiety brought by it, "feeling herself suddenly shriveled, 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"³.

As women mature, they will arrive at the stage of menopause. In fact, as early as the mid-nineteenth century on, menopause has been increasingly medicalized and has been related to depression, madness and even suicide. "Everything she acquired in puberty is now lost piece by piece; with the lapse of the reproductive service, her beauty vanishes, and usually the warm,

²Virginia Woolf: Mrs. Dalloway (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 3.

³Virginia Woolf: Mrs. Dalloway (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 33.

vital flow of feminine emotional life as well”⁴. It can be seen that the reproductive function of women is strongly emphasized, which affects women’s identification with themselves and hinders their pursuit of other values. This is why Mrs. Dalloway feels so great pressure and anxiety when she grows older. In the discourse of the male, a menopausal woman’s melancholia could lead to her to kill herself. Males use medical discourse to limit females in the attic. Considering the increasingly weaker physical condition and mental condition, Richard arranges his wife to lie on a narrow bed in the attic and asks her not to think. In fact, in the novel, Woolf tries to represent the living condition of a woman who is going through menopause.

What worth mentioning is that females are not the only victims of the male linear time. Males are also the victims. In the early 20 century, the strength of the British Empire was not as strong as that of America and Germany. However, in order to safeguard the honor of the Empire, many young men were sent to the battleground. “Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square”⁵. However, when he really fought in the battlefield, he experienced the nihilism of life, the cruelty of the war and the loss of humanity. He even suffers from shell shock and is troubled by headaches, sleeplessness, fears, and dreams. He always falls into the whirlpool of the past and recalls what happened in the war. Thus, he could not establish a relationship with reality. In his daily life, he is frequently haunted by the spectre of Evans and has the illusion that trees can talk. All of these symptoms are caused by the World War I and his inability to deal well with the fear brought by it. The symptoms are also the continuity of war trauma. In a word, Septimus’ time is stagnant.

“London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith”⁶. Many young men like Septimus fought for the British Empire. In addition to the stagnant life of survivors, the time of soldiers’ relatives is also stagnant. “The war was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favorite, killed”⁷; “on the street in London, there are poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War”⁸. The individual trauma becomes a collective trauma with many people losing their husbands, sons or friends in the war. However, “the King and Queen were at the Palace. There was a beating, a stirring of galloping ponies, tapping of cricket bats; Lords, Ascots, Ranelagh and all the rest of it; wrapped in the soft mesh of the grey-blue morning air”⁹. The relatives of the soldiers who died in the WWI lived in a stagnant and sad condition, since they could not escape the sadness of losing the one they loved. However, the Big Ben, which symbolizes Britain still strikes. The upper class is not affected by the War.

The war is the representation of Victorian masculinity, but shell shock deconstructs the masculinity. Martine Stone thinks that shell shock symbolizes the death of the Victorian Age¹⁰. The behavior of the survivors with shell shock is neglected by the Empire and even considered

4 Deutsch Helene: *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Grune & Stratton, China 1924), p. 207.

5 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 94.

6 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 94.

7 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 4-5.

8 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 21.

9 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 5.

10 Thomas W. Salmon. *The Care and Treatment of Mental Diseases and War Neuroses in the British Army* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2013), p. 88.

as the stain of the Empire's history. However, medical discourse is used by the Empire to erase the trauma that the war caused to British people.

Dr. Holmes keeps telling Septimus' wife that he is ok and attributes his headaches, insomnia and fear to nervousness. Dr. Bradshaw is also the one that is good at maintaining the progressing time of the Empire. The name of "Bradshaw" is the same as the timetable of the Empire's railway. Therefore, the name of Dr. Bradshaw has a strong metaphorical meaning here. It symbolizes the linear time of the Empire and emphasizes reason and progress. Dr. Bradshaw "never spoke of madness and called Septimus' illness as the loss of proportion"¹¹. The defender for the Empire's civilization will not admit that the seed of civilization will grow into the flower of evil. Dr. Bradshaw tries to silence Septimus through making him "rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months' rest until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve"¹². The order sent by the doctor forms an invisible prison and he tries to cut Septimus' link with the outside world. At last, the "insane" Septimus died on a fence. According to Michel Foucault, "where there is madness, there are fences"¹³. It can be understood that the "mad" Septimus is the object that should be disciplined and silenced by the "civilized" society.

The male time has limited both females and males. On one hand, it negates females' value and makes them live under the anxiety of losing their youth. On the other hand, males are also the victim. However, in addition to representing the suppression of the male time, Woolf has also represented the regenerating female time in the novel, which shows her expectation on women of the new generation to realize their own value.

4. The Gender Politics behind The Female Time

The life cycle is a combination of loss and regeneration. The reason is that the reproduction ability of women makes the female life continue and provides the opportunity for the next generation to find their selves and realize their value.

Through adopting the narrative technique of reverse narration and exploring the life moment of the female characters, we can find "her-story" that has been ignored by males. There is a not obvious linear narrative line in the novel, that is, Mrs. Dalloway goes to buy flowers, receive Peter and holds the party at last. However, reverse narration and the presentation of the moment of female characters in the novel have shown us the wakening of female consciousness.

In the linear narrative line, Clarissa, Rezia, Sally and other women live under the suppression of the male. However, in the recollection or fantasy that is presented with the use of reverse narration and the in-depth exploration into the life moment of these females, we can find that these women have their own idea of what life they would like to lead.

Clarissa imagines that "she would have been, in the first place, dark like Lady Bexborough, with a skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes. She would have been, like Lady Bexborough, slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like man; with a country house; very dignified, very sincere"¹⁴. From the words, it can be seen that Mrs. Dalloway is not satisfied with the life that she leads now. She wants to have her own property and a job. However, the reality is against her wishes. "Instead of which she had a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's... But often now this body she wore, this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing- nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown;

11 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p.106.

12 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p.108.

13 Foucault Michel: *Madness and Civilization* (Vintage Press, the U.S. 1988), p.278.

14 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p.11.

there being no more marrying, no more having of children now"¹⁵. She recalls her talk with Sally. "There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They meant to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written. The ideas were Sally's, of course—but very soon she was just as excited—read Plato in bed before breakfast; read Morris; read Shelly by the hour"¹⁶. It can be seen that even in the private space like the bedroom, Clarissa and Sally still have their own dream about the future. The idea of abolishing private property, which is a kind of revolutionary idea, challenges the core of capitalism. Her interest in reading philosophical and literary works shows her willing to think, which is however forbidden by her husband. Although Mrs. Dalloway feels invisible in reality, she still creates some space to realize the life that she cannot have. The indifference of Rezia's husband to Rezia makes her want to run away from the present life and she thus shouts out, "For you should see the Milan gardens"¹⁷. When looking at Maisie Johnson, Mrs. Dempster recollects her life. She questions herself if she knows what her life will turn out to be, will she make the same choice?

Through juxtaposing different women's recollection, fantasy and questioning about themselves, Woolf has shown readers their dissatisfaction of the life that these women lead now and their wish to change the present life whose tone is set by males. There is latent female time under the linear male time. The female time does not take the linear form. Instead, it is not linear and challenges the linear male time. However, these women have not made substantial moves towards realizing their value. Woolf lays the hope on Kilman and Elizabeth.

The time when Kilman and Elizabeth live in has changed a lot. "Those five years—1918 to 1923—had been somehow very important. People look different. Newspapers seemed different. Now, for instance, there was a man writing quite openly in one of the respectable weeklies about water-closets. That you couldn't have done ten years ago—written quietly openly about water-closets in a respectable weekly. And then this taking out a stick of rouge or a powder-puff, and making up in public"¹⁸. In fact, the five years are just the time after the ending of the WWI. For men left their country to the battlefield, women took the jobs that had been considered as men's. They did well. After WWI, many European countries began to give women the right to vote, inherit property, receive higher education and have jobs. In general, the society's perception about females has changed a little. Women have more opportunity to realize themselves.

Kilman is the teacher of Elizabeth. From her name, it can be seen that she has a strong urge to challenge male authority. To Woolf, one way to freedom is having financial freedom. Kilman does not come from a rich family, which makes her recognize the importance of making money and protecting her own financial freedom. She does not support Mrs. Dalloway's heavy reliance on men. Kilman often has the urge to tear off Mrs. Dalloway's mask and makes her know that she decides her own life. Since she does not rely on men for money, Kilman does not have to dress to please. As a result, Kilman does not have the risk of being put in the attic after losing her youth. Kilman is familiar with history, especially with contemporary history. She is invited by Elizabeth's father to teach his daughter. It is interesting that Woolf makes Kilman as a person who knows history. The human history has been written mainly by men and women's voice is seldom heard. Therefore, it implies that Kilman is more likely to find the aphasia of women in history.

15 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p.11.

16 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 36.

17 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p.25.

18 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs. Dalloway* (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p. 78.

Instead of teaching Elizabeth history that was written by males, Kilman shows her the blueprint of her generation. "Every profession is open to the women of your generation, said Miss Kilman. So she might be a doctor. She might be a farmer. She might own a thousand acres and have people under her. She would go and see them in their cottages"¹⁹. Kilman succeeds in inspiring Elizabeth to form her own mind and have her own idea about the job she can engage in. Elizabeth thinks that "she would become a doctor, a farmer, possibly go into Parliament if she found it necessary, all because of the strand"²⁰. The image of "the strand" is significant in the novel. Compared to home or the attic, the strand is a more open space. Going to the strand is a metaphor that Woolf uses here to show that Elizabeth has the willingness and courage to break the space limit of the male time, "for no Dalloways came down the Strand daily; she was a pioneer, a stray, venturing, trusting"²¹.

Through presenting the latent female time under the linear male time and arranging Elizabeth to appear daily at the strand—the open space, Woolf represents females' wish to break through male authority and realize their own value. The wish to realize one's own potential and value is passed from one generation to the next one.

5. Conclusion

In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf has employed several spatial forms of time to expose the suppression of the male time in the Victorian age on individuals and the collective. Besides, she also presents the regeneration of the female time, representing the latent or dominant gender politics. Through writing about the reflection of women of two generations on their life, Woolf shows their courage and determination to break through the male time.

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19 Virginia Woolf: Mrs. Dalloway (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p.149.

20 Virginia Woolf: Mrs. Dalloway (Penguin Books, Britain 1992), p.150.

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