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Anguish in the Age of Catastrophe: A Study of Time and Space in Mrs. Dalloway, by Virginia Woolf

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Resumo

Este trabalho analisa Mrs. Dalloway, de Virginia Woolf, através das teorias de Jacques Lacan, Martin Heidegger e Henri Lefebvre, situando a narrativa no contexto da Age of Catastrophe, de Eric Hobsbawm. A pesquisa investiga como angústia e desejo se manifestam em relação ao tempo e ao espaço, explorando a fragmentação da consciência moderna. A temporalidade não linear e o uso do espaço urbano revelam as tensões entre memória, identidade e experiência coletiva. O estudo evidencia como Woolf articula as ansiedades de sua época, transformando o romance em um poderoso comentário sobre a condição humana e os desafios do sujeito moderno.

Palavras-chave: Virginia Woolf; Mrs. Dalloway; angústia; tempo; espaço; modernidade

Abstract

This thesis analyzes Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf through the theories of Jacques Lacan, Martin Heidegger, and Henri Lefebvre, situating the novel within Eric Hobsbawm's Age of Catastrophe. The study investigates how anguish and desire manifest through time and space, exploring the fragmentation of modern consciousness. Woolf's nonlinear temporality and urban spatial representation highlight the tensions between memory, identity, and collective experience. This research shows how Woolf articulates the anxieties of her time, turning the novel into a profound commentary on the human condition and the challenges of the modern subject.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; Mrs. Dalloway; anguish; time; space; modernity

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1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925, remains a defining text of modernist literature, encapsulating the complexities of human consciousness, the fluidity of time, and the intricate interplay between individual lives and broader socio-political realities. For being written in the aftermath of World War I, Woolf's novel serves as a poignant exploration of the disillusionment and fragmentation of the early 20th Century, a period Eric Hobsbawm (1994) termed the "Age of Catastrophe." This frame of time, marked by unprecedented upheavals as war, economic crises, and the dissolution of pre-modern certainties forms the backdrop against which Woolf articulates profound questions about existence, identity, and, mainly, the human experience.

In the first place, this study situates *Mrs. Dalloway* within this broader historical context. The interwar period's instability, characterized by widespread trauma and uncertainty, permeates Woolf's narrative, shaping the characters' inner lives and also their interactions with the external world. For instance, the character Septimus, who has a post-traumatic stress disorder, embodies the collective scars of a generation, while Clarissa's existential reflections mirror the pervasive anguish of an era grappling with the loss of old and secure structures and values.

As it is possible to visualize throughout this study, Virginia Woolf's literary mastery lies not only in her ability to delve into the depths of individual consciousness but also in her nuanced critique of the socio-political structures that frame human existence. *Mrs. Dalloway* clearly epitomizes this dual engagement, constructing a narrative that is both intensely personal and profoundly historical. Taking the historical context into account, by being set against the backdrop of post-World War I London, the novel encapsulates the ethos of an era marked by disillusionment, recovery, and transformation.

In structure, the narrative in *Mrs. Dalloway* revolves around a single ordinary day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares to host a party at her house. However, through Woolf's revolutionary stream-of-consciousness narrative, as entitled by Eric Aurbach (2003), the novel transcends its immediate plot to probe the inner lives of its characters, particularly Clarissa and Septimus Warren Smith. These characters embody two divergent yet deeply intertwined responses to the modern condition: Clarissa's existential unease and Septimus's

post-traumatic despair reflect a shared undercurrent of anguish, offering a microcosmic examination of the broader societal confusion. From this point on, Woolf's masterful interweaving of these perspectives establishes a framework for interrogating the character's existential experience related to their feeling of anguish, and also their individual relation with time, space, and identity, all of them central concerns of this study.

This study seeks to elucidate the manifestations of anguish within *Mrs. Dalloway* by situating it within the theoretical paradigms of time and space. For this purpose, this study will be drawing upon the philosophical insights of Martin Heidegger (1962), Jacques Lacan (1969), and Henri Lefebvre (1996), examining how Woolf's characters navigate the fractured temporality and spatial dislocation emblematic of modernity. Heidegger's concept of *angst* (anguish), as articulated in his work *Being and Time* (1927), provides a foundation for understanding the existential dimension of anguish, emphasizing its relationship with temporality and the inevitability of mortality. Meanwhile, Lacan's psychoanalytic framework offers a lens through which to analyze the interplay between desire, lack, and the symbolic structures shaping human subjectivity. Lefebvre's spatial theories, by its turn, alongside contributions from Doreen Massey and Edward Soja, further illuminate the socio-political dimensions of space in Woolf's narrative, revealing how spatial practices mediate experiences of alienation and belonging.

By integrating these main theoretical perspectives, this study argues that *Mrs. Dalloway* presents a complex interrelation among the personal, the collective, the psychological, and the historical. The theoretical triangulation of individuality, time, and space allows for a nuanced understanding of the characters' experiences of anguish in this study. While Heidegger and Lacan provide a philosophical and psychoanalytic framework for examining internal states, Lefebvre grounds these experiences in the material realities, revealing the multifaceted nature of anguish in Woolf's novel, which arises not only from personal insecurities but also from the dissonance between individuals and their environments.

The psychoanalytical approach is fundamental in the analysis of this literary work. Through the portrayal of the main characters, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith, Woolf offers a narrative that resonates strongly with Lacanian psychoanalysis. As an example, Lacan's concept of the divided self—the subject split between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—illuminates the inner conflicts faced by Woolf's characters as they navigate their desires, fears, and anxieties. Clarissa, for instance, exists at the intersection of desire and

lack, oscillating between the demands of societal conventions (the Symbolic) and her internal yearnings for freedom and authenticity (the Imaginary).

On the other hand, Septimus confronts a traumatic collapse of a Symbolic order, embodying Lacan's notion of the Real, where language and meaning fail to provide coherence. This makes a proof why Woolf's modernist technique, with its fluid narrative perspective and fragmented temporality, aligns seamlessly with Lacan's theory. Lacan is going to expose how the unconscious, a layer of the human mind once assumed as inaccessible, can be studied and mapped, and Virgia Woolf brilliantly shows us how the unconscious can be structured using pure language, highlighting the non-linear, often chaotic nature of human thought.

In summary, by interweaving the external world with the interiority of her characters, Woolf reflects the Lacanian idea of desire as a force that both defines and destabilizes the self. In this way, *Mrs. Dalloway* becomes a profound literary articulation of Lacan's psychoanalytic principles, offering readers and eager researchers a window into the multifaceted nature of modern subjectivity.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand that the characters' experiences of desire, frustration and consequent anguish are not merely individual. They are deeply embedded in the spatial and temporal structures of their environment. This is why we cannot neglect the fact that Woolf's portrayal of London as a dynamic, fragmented space—a representation of personal and historical memory— for example, underscores this interesting connection, highlighting the inseparability of individual consciousness from the broader spatial and temporal matrices of modernity.

Similarly, Woolf's depiction of London through Lefevbre's lens, transcends its role as a mere setting, and the capital of the British Empire takes place as a living entity that reflects and shapes the emotional and psychological states of the characters. Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space, this study examines how Woolf's London operates as a site of socio-political tension, but also personal revelation. Throughout the narrative, the city's spaces—parks, streets, and homes—are imbued with historical and symbolic significance, which mediate the characters' experiences. For instance, Clarissa's walk through the city symbolizes both her physical movement through space and her metaphysical journey through memory and identity, both being personal and collective.

The main representations of time and space in the novel is inextricably linked to its exploration of modernist anxieties. A great example of it is the fact that Clarissa's day unfolds as a complex interplay of past and present, memory and anticipation, underscoring the fragmented temporality of modern life. This fragmentation, while sometimes disorientating for the reader, also offers opportunities for understanding the ongoing processes of introspection and redefinition. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique enables a fluid movement between different temporal planes, mirroring the non-linear workings of memory. At this point, it is necessary to delve into Heidegger's concept of *being-in-the-world,* the Dasein, which provides a philosophical framework to understand this temporal disjunction, suggesting that the characters' existential anxieties stem from their awareness of time as a finite resource.

Clarissa Dalloway strongly embodies this tension between the mundane and the existential, grappling with her finite existence (and the frustrations of her aging process) while reflecting on the meaning of her choices, relationships, and identity. Septimus Warren Smith,by his turn, haunted by the trauma of war, may reveal an alternative confrontation with death—where despair and alienation arise when his individuality is estranged from his capacity for authentic existence. This existential anguish before studied by Lacan, in Heidegger's perspective, serves as a gateway to authenticity, forcing Woolf's characters—and readers—to confront the fragility of existence and the possibility of creating meaning within the finitude of time.

But the study of Time without the shapes of Space would not be enough to explore the layers of this novel. When it comes to spatially, Woolf's London operates as a microcosm of the modern world, where diverse lives intersect and collide. The city's spaces are imbued with symbolic meaning, frequently reflecting the characters' inner conflicts and aspirations. Drawing on Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), this study examines how Woolf transforms urban spaces into arenas of social and psychological negotiation for her protagonists. The bustling streets, tranquil parks, and intimate domestic interiors of *Mrs. Dalloway* are not merely backdrops but active participants in the narrative, shaping and being shaped by the characters' experiences. For instance, it is even possible to understand how the interplay between public and private spaces highlights the tension between individuality and conformity, a recurring theme in Woolf's exploration of modern identity.

Furthermore, the novel's engagement with movement—both physical and metaphorical—illuminates the dynamic, and in several times poetic, relationship between self

and world. Clarissa's walk through London can be considered a materialization of this interplay, serving as a metaphor for her journey through memory and self-discovery. In the same way, Septimus's tragic trajectory reflects the disorientation and alienation of a war-torn psyche, underscoring the vulnerability of the human spirit in the face of modernity's upheavals.

This study also considers, briefly, the role of gender in shaping the characters' experiences of time, space, and movement. Clarissa's identity as a woman in a patriarchal society informs her interactions with both the private and public spheres, and also the constraints and possibilities of her social position.

In analyzing these themes, this study aims to demonstrate how Woolf's innovative narrative techniques and philosophical insights create a rich and multifaceted exploration of modernity. By foregrounding the interconnections between anguish, desire, time, and space, it argues that the Novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is not merely a portrait of a day in the life of its protagonist but a profound commentary on the complexities of existence in the modern era.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* stands as a monumental work in the literary canon, offering profound insights into the human condition. By intertwining the deeply personal with the socio-political, Woolf not only encapsulates the anxieties of her time but also provides a timeless commentary on the enduring struggles of identity, connection, and meaning. Taking the wealthiness of content present in Woof's literary work, this paper argues that the novel's exploration of anxiety and desire - conceptualised through the lenses of Lacan, Heidegger and Lefebvre - sheds light on the complex interplay between internal subjectivity and external reality.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, since it combines literary analysis, psychoanalytic theory, existential philosophy, and critical spatial theory in order to examine the representations of anguish and desire in *Mrs. Dalloway*. This research is grounded in a close reading of Virginia Woolf's novel, drawing upon the theoretical framework of Jacques Lacan, Martin Heidegger, Henri Lefebvre, and Eric Hobsbawm to explore the intersections between subjectivity, time, space, and modernity.

The present discussion is based on the premise that Woolf employs innovative narrative strategies to express the tensions of modern subjectivity. This study follows a symptomatic reading approach, as proposed by Pierre Macherey (2006), in which literary interpretation goes beyond the explicit narrative, uncovering its internal contradictions and latent meanings. Woolf's novel is thus examined through its gaps, silences, and subtexts, particularly regarding the representations of anguish and desire.

The choice of Lacan as a psychoanalytic framework is justified by the way his theory of desire and lack provides a structure for understanding the characters' internal conflicts. Lacan's concept of anguish as a signal of the proximity of desire (Lacan, 1962-1963) is central to this analysis, as it allows for an exploration of how subjective dissatisfaction permeates the experiences of the main characters, Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Warren Smith, and Peter Walsh.

In addition, Heidegger's philosophy is essential for understanding the novel's relationship with time. Heidegger (1927) argues that human existence is structured by temporality and being-towards-death, concepts that help elucidate how Woolf constructs a narrative marked by fragmentation and the relentless flow of thought. The sense of anguish in *Mrs. Dalloway* is deeply connected to Heideggerian notions of time, as characters are constantly confronted with their own finitude.

Lefebvre's (1974) theory of the production of space complements this analysis by providing a framework to interpret London not merely as a backdrop but as an active element shaping the characters' experiences. Woolf presents the city relationally, highlighting how urban space structures both social hierarchies and psychological states. The characters' movements through the city—Clarissa's walk through Westminster, Peter Walsh's restless wandering, Septimus's alienation—illustrate how spatial interactions reflect internal struggles.

Finally, Eric Hobsbawm's concept of the "Age of Catastrophe" (1994) offers a historical context for the anxieties depicted in the novel. The aftermath of World War I and the socio-political upheavals of the early 20th century are embedded in *Mrs. Dalloway*'s narrative structure, making historical reference indispensable for understanding both the novel's individual and collective anxieties. The novel's engagement with war trauma, shifting gender roles, and the fragility of social order exemplifies Woolf's acute awareness of the crises defining modernity.

As an interdisciplinary and theoretical study, this research does not aim to provide a definitive interpretation of *Mrs. Dalloway* but rather to highlight specific aspects of the novel through the lens of anguish and modern experiences of time and space. Additionally, the choice of theoretical framework excludes other valuable approaches, such as feminist criticism and postcolonial studies, which could offer alternative readings of Woolf's work.

Despite these limitations, this study seeks to demonstrate how the intersection of literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis can offer new perspectives on how *Mrs. Dalloway* represents modern tensions. By examining Woolf's treatment of time, space, and subjective fragmentation, this research reaffirms the novel's relevance in the ongoing discourse on identity, history, and human existence in an era of transformation and uncertainty.

3. Theoretical Framework

The concept of anguish is essential for exploring the psychological dimensions of modernity (LACAN, 2014). Specifically, examining the 20th-century interwar period, which makes part of what Eric Hobsbawm (1995) described as "The Age of Catastrophe," we encounter a time marked by unprecedented societal dislocation, economic uncertainty, and existential dread. Hobsbawm (1995) highlights the collapse of old certainties and the fragmentation of traditional structures as defining characteristics of this era. These societal transformations were the most rapid and profound in history (HOBSBAWM, 1995), making this period a rich context for studying how existentialist theories and psychoanalytic frameworks shed light on individual responses to these crises.

The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (2014) was a prominent figure in shaping 20th-century understandings of anguish (*angoisse*). According to his psychoanalytic theories, anguish does not arise from a fear of a specific object but rather from confronting an inner void. It represents the most authentic encounter with what we may refer to as the Real (Lacan, 1995), thereby exposing one's deepest desires. The Real, in this context, refers to the raw and unfiltered aspects of existence—those elements that cannot be fully comprehended or articulated through language.

“Man finds his home in a point located in the Other that lies beyond the image from which we are fashioned. This place represents the absence where we stand” (Lacan, 2014). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the "Other" signifies external structures beyond the "Self," as language, culture, society, and unconscious forces.

Therefore, the sense of self, shaped by an external image, like a reflection in a mirror, is incomplete and inaccurate, as it fails to capture the complexities of the true self. Instead, Lacan (2014) proposes that our identity lies beyond this image, in an absence, something beyond representation. For him, we are defined by what we lack, our desires, and our relationship to the Other.

It is also important to add to this discussion one of Lacan’s (2014) most famous assertions, which says that "man’s desire is the desire of the Other." (Lacan, 2014). This statement summarizes the idea that human desire does not have a spontaneous nature, but is rather influenced, or involuntarily imposed, by the desire of external forces - the Other. This formulation builds on Hegel’s (1977) idea of recognition (*Anerkennung*) from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where self-consciousness is achieved through the recognition of another self-conscious being (Hegel, 1977).

In other words, the subject’s desire is therefore dependent on being desired by the Other. This is the reason why Lacan notes that "the Other is the one who sees me." (Lacan, 2014). In this context, Lacan (2014) states that desire is not merely the pursuit of material or abstract goals to satisfy needs. Instead, it is a constant striving for something beyond the object itself — what he calls a *metonymic* pursuit (Lacan, 2014).

> It means that the Other will institute something, designated by a, which is what is involved at the level of what desires. The whole impasse lies here. In demanding to be acknowledged, right where I get acknowledged, I only get acknowledged as an object. I get what I desire, I'm an object, and I can't stand myself as an object, since this object that I am is of its essence a consciousness, a *Selbstbewusstsein.* (Lacan, 2014, p. 24)

The Lacanian notion above echoes Hegel's (1977) *Master-Slave Dialectic*, where the recognition given by the master to the slave is partial, one-sided, and does not fully acknowledge the slave’s self-consciousness. Similarly, Lacan shows how the subject, in their quest to be recognized by the Other, finds themselves reduced to an object in the Other's gaze.

The objectification of the subject is central to Lacan's theory of desire, but it creates a fundamental impasse: by achieving acknowledgment, the subject becomes aware of their own objectification. This self-awareness triggers a deeper existential crisis, as the subject recognizes themselves as an *object* within the field of the Other's gaze, instead of as a fully autonomous *consciousness* (Lacan, 2014).

After an analysis on the nature of desire from a Lacanian perspective, it is easier to understand why Lacan (2014) notes that "The presence of the Other is what structures anguish, for it is the Other who confronts the subject with the question of what they are in the Other's desire" (Lacan, 1995). In addition, to objectively convey his statement, Lacan (2014) proposes the questionings below:

> Freudian doctrine introduced regarding subjectivity, Che vuoi?, Que veux-tu?, What wouldst thou? Push the functioning, the insertion of the key, a little further and you have, Que me veut-Il? with the ambiguity that the French permits with respect to the me between the direct or indirect object. It's not simply, What does the Other want with me? but also a suspended questioning that directly concerns the ego, not How does He want me? but, What does He want concerning this place of the ego? (Lacan, 2014, p. 6)

Those questions structure a solid base to the understanding of anxiety because they force the Self to confront their lack of a stable identity. Who am I really? How does the Other perceive me? What does the Other desire from me?

From this point, Lacan (2014) suggests that one's identity is constructed not from a clear, stable self-image, but from something outside of us, an absence shaped by external forces (the Other). One may seek meaning or a sense of belonging in this external structure, but this quest is never fully complete. The existential "home" lies in this gap, in the tension between our self-image and the unattainable wholeness we desire.

These psychoanalytical theories align with Hobsbawm's characterization of the 20th century as an era where traditional meaning systems broke down. The Age of Catastrophe mirrors Lacan's notion of symbolic collapse, leaving individuals confronted with existential uncertainty and a redefinition of identity. For instance, the disintegration of European empires and the mass casualties of the world wars left populations bereft of collective narratives that once provided stability. All along, death was permeating daily lives.

> The British lost a generation - half a million men under the age of thirty, notably among their upper classes, whose young men, destined as gentlemen to be officers who set an example, marched into battle at the head of their men and were consequently mown down first. One quarter of the Oxford and Cambridge students under the age of twenty-five who served in the British army in 1914 were killed. (Hobsbawn, 1995, p. 26)

Such tremendous losses result in a process in which anguish becomes both a personal and sociological phenomenon, resonating through individual psyches and societal structures.

In addition to Lacan's theories, Martin Heidegger's (1962) existential philosophy deepens the understanding of anguish by analyzing the dynamic between existence and temporality. Heidegger (1962) suggests that giving up life superfluities and trivialities, and pursuing authenticity is an obligation for a conscious human being, which by its turn accepts the finite nature of its existence.

> "Resoluteness constitutes the loyalty of existence to its own Self. As resoluteness, which is ready for anxiety, this loyalty is at the same time a possible way of revering the sole authority which a free existing can have -of revering the repeatable possibilities of existence. […] As fate, resoluteness is freedom to give up some definite resolution, and to give it up in accordance with the demands of some possible Situation or other." (Heidegger, p. 443)

As having witnessed the horrors of Germany's involvement in World War I, Heidegger's (1962) philosophy is deeply infused with analyzes regarding the human relationship with death. For him, freedom is grounded in the human confrontation with death and the realization of life's finitude, followed by the taking of responsibility for one's own existence.

However, it is not possible to fully comprehend Heideggerian existential philosophy without engaging with the concept of *Dasein*. Introduced by Heidegger (1962), *Dasein* is a German term that conveys the idea of "Being-in-the-World" and refers to the unique way a human being may experience their existence (Heidegger, 1962). Therefore, in this study, Heidegger's ideas of Authentic and Unauthentic *Dasein* will be fundamental. These two definitions distinguish between individuals who live authentically—those who confront the reality of death, which provides a framework for meaning and freedom (authentic *Dasein*)—and those who immerse themselves in superficial distractions, becoming absorbed by the everyday world (*Unauthentic Dasein*).

For Heidegger (1962), as time becomes a pivotal point for understanding existence, anguish arises from the confrontation with one's finitude and the realization of the "possibility of being-a-whole" through death. This notion finds resonance in the Age of Catastrophe, where mortality became an inescapable reality not just on a personal level but also as a collective experience (Hobsbawn, 1995).

As a final pillar in our study, it is both logical and necessary to pair the concepts of time and space. For Henri Lefebvre (1991), time is inherently linked to space, and these two dimensions are inseparable in shaping human experience.

> Times, of necessity, are local; and this goes too for the relations between places and their respective times. Phenomena which an analytical intelligence associates solely with 'temporality', such as growth, maturation and aging, cannot in fact be dissociated from 'spatiality' (itself an abstraction). Space and time thus appear and manifest themselves as different yet unseverable. (LEFEVBRE, 1991, p. 175)

This relationship between time and space becomes particularly relevant when analyzing experiences of modernity, in which disconnection between lived time and lived space can intensify feelings of existential confusion (Lefevbre, 1991). Moreover, in moments of existential crisis, individuals perceive time as either oppressive or chaotic, reflecting their disconnection from a coherent spatial or social order – or what Lefevbre (1991) may call "rhythms".

Lastly, it is possible to infer that these frameworks—Lacan's concept of psychoanalytic anguish, Heidegger's existential *Dasein*, and Lefebvre's spatial rhythms—together provide a comprehensive understanding of anguish in the Age of Catastrophe, while Hobsbawm's historical analysis offers the necessary empirical context for this analysis. The interaction between history, psychology, and philosophy reveals how the collapse of external structures mirrors and intensifies the internal struggles of individuals, creating a continuous cycle of anguish and existential questioning.

4. Discussion

> "Human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but rather life obliges them to give birth to themselves." (Garcia Marquez, 1988).

This profound reflection by Gabriel García Márquez will help us understand the existential core of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. The notion of continuous self-creation is also present in Michel Foucault's (1997) philosophical reflections on subjectivity. Foucault argues that "from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art." (Foucault, 1997). Both García Márquez and Foucault challenge the popular belief that human beings are born with fixed personalities and immutable beliefs. Instead, they emphasize the fluidity of identity, portraying it as a dynamic process of self-construction shaped by experience and circumstance.

Approaching existentialist theories is essential for analyzing 20th-century contemporary literature. But it is also crucial to draw upon literary criticism to understand how these representations emerge within literary narratives. Erich Auerbach's (2003) celebrated work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* examines how literature strives to depict reality—not merely as a reproduction of appearances, but as a reflection of social, cultural, and existential dimensions. In his study, Auerbach (2003) traces the evolution of realism in Western literature, beginning with Homer's epics and ending in Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness.

Auerbach's (2003) work on mimesis[1] provides a foundation for understanding how Woolf's narrative strategy breaks with classical forms of representation. In his analysis of several storytelling registers over time, he draws attention to how reality is depicted with different degrees of depth, perspective, and interiority, among those narratives. Thus, this process of narrative interiorization in the 20th-Century serves as an essential literary mechanism for examining the psychological and abstract dimensions of human experience in modernity, particularly through the lens of Virginia Woolf's approach to representation of individual realities.

The shift from epic externality to internal psychological depth echoes in Woolf's stream-of-consciousness technique, as seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*. By employing free indirect discourse, Woolf grants access to the innermost thoughts of her characters, illustrating, as García Márquez (1988) noted, the "birth" of the self through consciousness.

[1] Mimesis is a classical concept with its origin tracing back from Greek philosophy, particularly associated with Plato and Aristotle, who used it to describe art's capacity to imitate or reproduce reality. The term "mimesis" comes from the Greek *mimeisthai*, meaning "to imitate," which is derived from *mimos* ("mime"). (MERRIAM WEBSTER, 2024)

4.1 The Historical Context of Mrs. Dalloway

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* was first published by Hogarth Press in 1925 (Goldman, 2006). The narrative unfolds a historical background in a continuous account, without chapters, but divided into twelve sections marked by spacing, depicting a single June day in London in 1923. It traces the parallel experiences of two characters: Clarissa Dalloway, a society hostess and politician's wife, and Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked young war veteran (Woolf, 1990). Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes* (1994) helps us understand the social, political, and existential conditions of the early 20th century shaped Woolf's narrative.

Hobsbawm (1994) describes the period between 1914 and 1945 as an "Age of Catastrophe" characterized by two world wars, economic depression, and ideological extremism. *Mrs. Dalloway* is set in 1923, right in the aftermath of the First World War, a time when Britain was grappling with the consequences of mass violence, shell shock[2], and the disintegration of former certainties regarding empire, modernity, and human progress (Hobsbawn, 1994).

Hobsbawm's (1994) book brings also external views on the 20th Century, quoting the British Musician Yehudi Menuhi, who says: "If I had to sum up the twentieth century, I would say that it raised the greatest hopes ever conceived by humanity, and destroyed all illusions and ideals". This is the world Virginia Woolf's characters are inserted in, war shattered the stability of previous decades, leading to a "crisis of civilization." Ordinary people were no longer shielded from mass death, and modern warfare exposed civilians to unprecedented forms of suffering (Hobsbawn, 1994).

This is mirrored in the character of Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran suffering from shell shock. His hallucinations and eventual suicide highlight how the war continued to haunt individuals long after it ended. The trauma of war is not only physical but also psychological, and it permeates postwar society. In one passage of the book, Septimus feels that "The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames." (Woolf, 1990). After the war trauma, this starts to be his reference of the real world. On the other hand, even Clarissa Dalloway, who lives a comfortable life and has very little to vex her, thinks that "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears . Tears and sorrows ; courage and endurance ; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing." (Woolf, 1990).

[2] Shell shock is a term historically used to describe the psychological trauma experienced by soldiers exposed to intense stress during wartime. It was later conceptualized as a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) linked to the overwhelming mental strain of battle, also referred to as "battle fatigue" or "combat fatigue". (MERRIAM WEBSTER, 2024)

This sense of impending collapse is directly tied to the existential anxieties that Hobsbawm (1994) identifies as funding part to the interwar period. Hobsbawm notes that the collapse of European hegemony and the wars of the 20th century affected not only soldiers but also civilians. The collective trauma described by Hobsbawm echoes Woolf's (1990) representation of personal trauma. Hobsbawm (1994) also describes how civilian populations were dragged into the horrors of total war, with air raids and bombardments affecting not just soldiers but also urban centers, as Virginia Woolf's London represented in Mrs. Dalloway.

> For it was the middle of June . The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven—over . It was June . The King and Queen were at the Palace. (Woolf, 1990, p. 04)

In the excerpt above, Clarissa illustrates one of the most impactful reflections on wartime. Although the war had officially ended, it left behind symbolic wounds and scars that would never fully heal. While civilians continued to endure the psychological and emotional aftershocks of conflict, the political leaders and government officials who orchestrated it remained insulated from its harshest consequences, occupying the safest positions within the chaos.

Delving deeper into the private lives of the main characters, as we are going to explore with more details in further sections, Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class London housewife, embodies this existential dread in a more subtle, personal way - if compared to Septimus. Her seemingly mundane reflections on aging, death, and memory throughout the narrative can be interpreted as her own confrontation with mortality, paralleling Septimus's more overt struggle. Both characters experience a form of anguish that, based on Hobsbawm's theoretical framework, can be understood as symptomatic of living in an era where life had lost its former predictability.

In this context, when Clarissa Dalloway reflects "She always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (Woolf, 1990), it speaks not only to the physical dangers of a world at war but mainly to the psychological hazards induced by the prevailing sense of uncertainty. It is dangerous because it threatens not only your existence, but your will of living. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) says, "existence precedes essence". Thus, what is really

being harmed in this post-war scenario is the human condition of freely experiencing its existence.

Building on this reflection, the notion of anguish becomes a central axis for understanding the existential crisis present in Mrs. Dalloway. Unlike fear, which is directed at a specific object, anguish arises from a confrontation with the uncertainty of existence itself (Lacan, 2014). Clarissa Dalloway's reflection on the danger of living "even one day" illustrates this state of vulnerability, where the unpredictability of life unsettles the very foundation of selfhood. Also, when Clarissa mentions that there was in the Dalloway family the tradition of public service, it is possible to assume how the old values and traditions of her private life started to crumble. Individuals no longer had clear social roles, and ideological confusion reigned.

> Those five years, 1918 to 1923, had been, he suspected, somehow very important. People looked 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 quite 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. (Woolf, 1990, p.68)

However, this confusion served as a catalyst for the artistic freedom that defined the early 20th century. In the excerpt above, Peter Walsh, Mrs. Dalloway's youthful lover, reflects on the London he encounters after spending five years in India. We can see how the disruption of the old norms of etiquette and feminine discretion gradually took hold of London's social scene. Also, his surprise at seeing a man writing about water closets draws a parallel to Marcel Duchamp's provocative works, such as his infamous exhibition of a public urinal titled *Fountain* (1917), which epitomized the spirit of Dadaism.

According to Erich Hobsbawm (1994), Dadaism, emerging amidst the turmoil of World War I in Zurich, was less a traditional art movement and more a radical response to the senselessness of war and the societal structures that enabled it at the time. It was mainly characterized by its rejection of conventional art, embracing collage, irony, and scandal to challenge bourgeois sensibilities. Duchamp's *Fountain* embodied this *ethos*, subverting notions of artistic value and creation by presenting a mundane object as art. This deliberate absurdity echoed the psychological and existential chaos of the time, a theme, as we saw, also deeply woven into Woolf's portrayal of post-war London.

In addition, together with the sense of confusion - in which an individual feels lost between the old and the new, the moral and the immoral - we have an increasing sense of alienation. In 1959, Seeman (1959) identified five prominent features of alienation: powerlessness, self-estrangement, social isolation, normlessness, and meaninglessness. Septimus's sense of alienation is most extreme, as he feels that his mind is disconnected from the world. His sense of powerlessness is evident in his inability to reconcile his wartime traumas with the mundane expectations of civilian life. Also, his self-estrangement is particularly acute; his repeated assertion that he "could not feel" (Woolf, 1969) reflects an internal disconnection from his emotions and identity.

Moreover, Septimus's social isolation is compounded by his designation as a "madman," a label that estranges him from the social fabric. His perceptions of societal norms—such as Dr. Bradshaw's rigid emphasis on "proportion"—become symbols of normlessness, as these values appear meaningless and oppressive to Septimus in light of his own existential suffering. Finally, his sense of meaninglessness culminates in his suicide, a tragic act that underscores his complete detachment from life's purpose or coherence.

Woolf's (1969) representation of alienation mirrors the social fragmentation Hobsbawm identifies, using Septimus mental disintegration to symbolize the broader breakdown of meaning in the postwar world. His alienation is both internal and external—he is alienated from society as a "madman" but also from himself, as he experiences both disembodiment and derealization.

In essence, it is possible to see that, in light of the historical background Hobsbawm brings to Virginia Woolf's representation of human anguish, death is a central topic. And not only physical death as a defining feature of the "Age of Catastrophe.", but also metaphorical death.

On one side, we see mortality rates rising, with civilians and soldiers alike experiencing large-scale death in ways that reshaped cultural attitudes. Also, as we see in the book, among Clarissa's friends, those who survived the war were surrounded by widows, orphans, and veterans. The shadow of death hung over every aspect of life, shaping art, politics, and philosophy. On the other side, the sense of existential crisis permeated this period, as people questioned the meaning of life after witnessing the horrors of war. This shift was philosophical as well as social, and it was felt on an individual level.

But as existential crises intensified, the early 20th Century saw the rise of psychoanalysis as a groundbreaking framework for understanding human behavior and mental states (Hobsbawnn, 1994). Sigmund Freud's theories on the unconscious mind, repression, and the interplay of the id, ego, and superego provided new ways to interpret trauma and internal conflicT (Freud, 1961). Freud's (1961) concepts, such as the death drive, *Thanatos*, and the compulsion to repeat, are particularly relevant in exploring characters like Septimus, whose experiences reflect a mind grappling with unprocessed war trauma.

Building on Freud's work, Jean-Jacques Lacan introduced a structuralist perspective, emphasizing the role of language and the symbolic order in shaping human subjectivity. The power of language is going to be, of course, essential in the process of analyzing a literary work. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and his focus on the fragmented self offer valuable insights into the disjunction between identity and reality seen in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

4.2 Between Anguish and Desire

As Hobsbawn (1994) pointed out, the development of psychoanalytic theories was necessary to understand the social and cultural changes occurring during the beginning of the 20th Century. In this context, writing decades apart, in different countries, both Virginia Woolf and Jean-Jacques Lacan explored the human condition's fragmented nature, existential doubt, and the constant search for meaning, with Woolf presenting these themes through her characters' internal monologues, and Lacan, with the help of Freud's studies, formalizing them in psychoanalytic theory.

We could see in the previous section how this sense of anguish flourish among European societies, but it is now important to structure what this anguish is made of. One of Lacan's central ideas about anguish is that it arises when the subject confronts the gaze - *le regard* - of the Other. As pointed out before, this gaze is not the literal look of another person, but rather a symbolic recognition that the subject is being observed or objectified. Anguish occurs because, in that moment, the subject becomes aware of their objectification and loss of self-autonomy.

In summary, to better understand anguish portrayed in Mrs. Dalloway, the gaze is disorienting because it turns the subject into an object of the Other's desire. For Lacan, anguish arises when the subject recognizes that they are not the master of their own self-perception.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, our protagonist, Clarissa, experiences anguish in this exact way. Her preoccupation with how others perceive her, especially during preparations for her party, mirrors Lacan's notion of the gaze. She is constantly reflecting on her social role as "Mrs. Dalloway" and questioning her choices, haunted by thoughts of her past relationship with Sally Seton and her missed chance with Peter Walsh. Her identity is shaped by her awareness of how others see her, particularly her husband and her high-society acquaintances. It is important to emphasize that, from a Lacanian perspective, the term "others" extends beyond individual people. It encompasses the broader social structures, such as roles, institutions, norms, and moral frameworks, that those individuals are a part of and through which they derive their significance.

> She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (Woolf, 1990, p.09)

The passage above reflects Lacan's notion of the subject's alienation in the gaze of the Other. Clarissa experiences a division between "Clarissa", her inner self, and "Mrs. Richard Dalloway", her social role. This split between the private and public self is precisely what Lacan identifies as the source of anguish — the subject's recognition of their own objectification within the desire present in social norms.

According to Lacan (2014), desire is always the "desire of the Other", *le désir de l'Autre*, which means that human desire is mediated through the desire of another person or subject. Desire is not autonomous but relational, since we desire to be desired. The subject's desire is shaped by what they perceive as desirable in the eyes of the Other.

Clarissa Dalloway's desire can be understood in terms of her relationship with her social milieu and her struggle for recognition. Her meticulous preparations for the party symbolize an attempt to be seen, admired, and validated by the social Other. The party becomes what Lacan (2014) would call *objet petit a*. In other words, it represents the unattainable object of

desire, an utopian ideal that she can never fully control, as her self-worth is dependent on the guests' approval.

When the narrator states, “She would buy the flowers herself.” (Woolf, 1990), it portrays, in a lacanian view, a woman’s desire to assert control over her image. More specifically, Clarissa’s decision to personally buy the flowers symbolizes her attempt to assert her status within her constrained social reality. So, as she walks through London to accomplish this task, her actions reflect a deeper desire to ensure perfection and order, highlighting her need to craft an environment that mirrors her internal aspirations and struggles. This small yet significant act resonates with themes of independence and the tension between societal expectations and personal agency.

But in Lacan's terms, her desire is still shaped by the gaze of the Other — her guests and society as a whole. She is caught in a loop of desire for recognition, striving to be the perfect hostess not for herself, but to satisfy the desire of the Other.

> Every time she gave a party, she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly their clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background. It was possible to say things you couldn’t say otherwise, things that required an effort; possible to go much deeper. But not for her—not yet, anyhow. (WOOLF, 1990, p. 164)

This reflection points to the gap between the real and the unreal in the protagonist’s perception, which resonates with Lacan's (2014) distinction between the Imaginary - false self-image - and the Symbolic - social roles and norms. In the excerpt above, Clarissa’s search for validation through the party aligns with Lacan’s (2014) argument that desire is always, somehow, a borrowed reflection from the Other’s desire.

Mrs. Dalloway has her own *objet petit a*, but Septimus Warren Smith embodies the most literal manifestation of this idea. His hallucinations of his comrade Evans, deceased in war, is his unattainable desire, a haunting figure whose presence drives his despair. It is evident that Septimus cannot reconcile his relationship to Evans - which represents his unresolved trauma - because Evans remains just out of reach, trapped in the Real. His desire to see Evans again becomes the impossible pursuit of the *objet petit a*.

> [...] they sang in prolonged and piercing voices, using Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where

> the dead walk, proclaiming how there is no death. There was his hand; there were the dead. White shapes began assembling behind the railings opposite. Yet, he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings! (Woolf, 1990, p.23)

It is possible to see in Septimus' tendency of repetition, regarding his traumatic memories with Evans, that the friend who was killed in the War is not just a personal grief but a broader symbol of loss in the aftermath of war.

Another significant figure in Woolf's narrative is Rezia, Septimus's Italian wife. Her anguish is visible throughout the story as she navigates the emotional and psychological struggles of caring for her husband, who is increasingly detached from reality due to his war trauma. Rezia, although a secondary piece, is a complex character, embodying both love and frustration. Her attempts to anchor Septimus to the present and to the life they once dreamed of reflect her desperation to maintain a sense of normalcy.

> But such things happen to everyone. Everyone has friends who were killed in the war. Everyone gives up something when they marry. She had given up her home. She had come to live here, in this awful city. But Septimus let himself think about horrible things—things she could think about too, if she tried. (Woolf, 1990, p. 62)

Rezia is a woman full of anguish, and her regrets and frustrations perfectly fit the Lacanian structure in question. She daily faces the challenge of reconciling her love for Septimus with the overwhelming burden of his mental illness. Also, her isolation is deepened by being a foreigner in England. Rezia can also be considered an example of how mental health was poorly understood during this period, as well as how the trauma of war affects not only soldiers but also their families.

Moreover, Rezia can be interpreted as embodying *objet petit a* in her attempts to "restore" Septimus to normalcy. Her experience of the gaze comes both through societal judgment and her own self-perception as a wife failing in her duties. In other words, she perceives her role through the gaze of an imagined ideal of marital success, which adds to her a sense of inadequacy.

In other to summarize the ideas of this section, it is important to recapitulate that Lacan (2014) claims that anguish emerges when the symbolic network (language, social norms) breaks down, revealing the Real, which by its turn is encountered most forcefully in experiences of frustrations trauma, death, and madness.

Although Mrs. Dalloway and Rezia's frustrations with life, their regrets and the social pressure over them serve as a clear representation of anguish, Septimus is still the most extreme example of it. Septimus's suicide reflects this confrontation with the Real. His experience of war trauma is not something that language or rational thought can fully symbolize. The constant auditory hallucinations of Evans and the "flames" he sees are his attempts to give form to the unspeakable Real. His anguish, then, is not just fear or anxiety but the confrontation with the void beyond language.

4.3 Time and Space in the Fabric of Human Experience

> "Time and space are not conditions in which we live, but modes by which we think." (Einstein, 1916).

Albert Einstein once observed the fundamental role these dimensions, time and space, play in shaping human cognition. Therefore, this notion offers a lens through which we can also explore the existential weight of time and space in literature.

Particularly in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, our subject of analysis, the narrative intertwines the physicality of space—manifested in the streets of London—with the subjective experience of time, reflecting the complex interplay between external reality and internal perception about life and death. In this light, Heidegger's philosophy, which views time as central to the human condition, provides a deeper framework for understanding how Woolf's characters confront existence. Moreover, Henri Lefebvre's concepts of space will serve as an essential bridge, illuminating the dynamic relationship between temporal experiences and spatial realities within the narrative.

As in Heiddeger's theories, death in a central topic represented in Mrs. Dalloway. Early in the narrative, we have Clarissa quoting the first verses of a song present in William Shakespeare's Cymbeline.

> Fear no more the heat o' the sun, Nor the furious winter's rages; Thou thy worldly task hast done, Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages: Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney-sweepers, come to dust. (Shakespeare, 2024)

In *Fear No More the Heat o' the Sun*, Shakespeare contemplates the cessation of life's suffering and the finality of death, where the soul is freed from the burdens of time and external forces, such as the oppressive heat of the sun or the ferocity of winter. This sentiment accurately resonates with Virginia Woolf's exploration of time and mortality in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where the characters grapple with existential anguish connected to the relentless passage of time.

We see Woolf's characters are caught in a temporal trap, oscillating between past regrets and future anxieties, struggling to reconcile their inner lives with the world around them. Those feelings are clear when passages like Clarissa thinking "She had been so happy, she had been so young, and she had been so free." or Septimus revisiting in regret "He had killed his wife and he was sorry for it."

Heidegger suggests that awareness of our finitude can either lead to authentic existence or to anguish, as the realization of death disrupts our everyday engagement with time. In Shakespeare's and Woolf's works, death is not only a literal end but also an existential condition, where time's fleeting nature shapes the characters' experience of being.

It is possible to see that Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and Martin Heidegger's Being and Time, published only two years later, share profound thematic resonances. Woolf's portrayal of human existence, temporality, and death aligns with Heidegger's exploration of Dasein (the being who questions its own being) and its relationship with *being-toward-death* and *being-in-the-world*.

For Heidegger, *Dasein* is a unique form of being that is always already embedded in the world. This concept of *being-in-the-world* (*In-der-Welt-sein*) emphasizes that humans do not exist in isolation but are always situated within a social, historical, and spatial context. Dasein is not merely a "thing" in the world but a being that is aware of its own existence.

From this point, Clarissa Dalloway's sense of *being-in-the-world* is expressed through her deep connection to the space of London. The city itself is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in the narrative. Her walk through London serves as a meditation on existence, revealing her embeddedness in the world. The spatiality of London mirrors Heidegger's idea

that the world is not a neutral environment but a web of meanings that shape Dasein's experience.

> She had reached the Park gates. She stood for a moment, looking at the omnibuses in Piccadilly. She would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that. She felt very young; at the same time, unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day. Not that she thought herself clever, or much out of the ordinary. (Woolf, 1990, p. 7)

In addition, Clarissa's oscillation in the excerpt above, between feeling "very young" and "unspeakably aged", reflects this awareness of time, where she experiences both the vitality of life and the inevitable proximity of death. Heidegger argues that *Dasein* is always aware of its finitude, and this awareness shapes how one relates to the world and oneself. Clarissa's simultaneous sense of being "outside, looking on" while "slicing like a knife through everything" exemplifies her sense of alienation—her feeling of existing both within and outside of the world around her.

Also, her feeling of being "out, far out to sea and alone" perfectly exemplifies the *Dasein*'s sense of isolation in the world. According to Heidegger, *Dasein* is always in the world but is ultimately alone in its experience of being. Clarissa's perpetual sense of danger—"that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day"—echoes Heidegger's notion that *Dasein* is constantly confronted by the possibility of death, physical or metaphorical, as an ever-present tension that shapes human existence.

The passage, in short, shows the core of Clarissa's temporal anguish and how she is not merely living through time. She is acutely aware of her existence within it, engaging with both the past and the future, and struggling to find meaning in her transient and fragile condition.

Following this topic, another core element of Heidegger's philosophy is the notion of being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*), which emphasizes that the awareness of mortality is essential to authentic existence. In specific words, death is not simply an event that happens at the end of life; it is an ever-present possibility that gives life its urgency. For Heidegger, Dasein can achieve authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) only by confronting death. With that being said, it is visible how death pervades the narrative in *Mrs. Dalloway*, not only through

Clarissa's reflections on aging but also, and more precisely, through the storyline of Septimus, who ultimately takes his own life in an suffering act of anguish. By the end of the story, Clarissa's realization of death, in its pure materialization, occurs as she hears of Septimus's suicide during her party. This moment triggers an existential awakening in her:

> Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (Woolf, 1990, p. 177)

Here, Woolf aligns with Heidegger's notion of *being-toward-death*. Clarissa does not treat death as an abstract, distant possibility as in previous passages of the narrative, but finally as an immanent reality. She also reflects on the idea that life is fleeting, and only through death is there a kind of "defiance" of the world's indifference. This acknowledgment of death brings her closer to Heidegger's idea of authentic existence, where the individual moves beyond *das Man* (the impersonal "they") to confront the truth of their own singular mortality.

Although some researchers in the literary field, as Jason Wakefield (2013), may disagree that Mrs. Dalloway could reach her authentic Dasein; those specific hints throughout the narrative demonstrate her evolution regarding her confrontation with mortality, which forced her to recognize her own finitude.

On the other hand, Heidegger emphasizes that living authentically requires breaking away from das Man - the impersonal social force that dictates everyday behavior - and reclaiming one's own sense of self. Das Man is a proper reference we have to explaining why Clarissa is always adopting social norms and expectations rather than confronting its unique existence. But we should not fail to consider that her anguish towards those norms and social pressure make her consciously aware of what an authentic life should be.

Inauthentic existence is marked by conforming to *das Man*, where people lose their individuality. We can see Clarissa trying to fit the social circle she belongs to, but her anguish and frustrations again make her uncomfortable with this scripted way of living. When Clarissa asks "Why, after all, did she do these things? Why seek pinnacles and stand drenched in fire? Might it consume her anyhow!" We see an internal conflict regarding the superficiality of the parties she organizes and the social expectations that drive her. Also, when she states that "Her clothes, her being Mrs. Richard Dalloway, not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway.", her unconformity with her own lack of individuality by having a

prescribed role in society is an absolute source of anguish caused by her awareness of what an authentic life should be.

By living under the name "Mrs. Richard Dalloway," Clarissa allows herself to be absorbed by the expectations placed on her by society, reducing herself to a social role rather than asserting her authentic self. But it is important to consider that in this specific historical context, being a woman means you are almost completely faded to have some of your individuality absorbed by a masculine figure. Her constant self-reflection, however, signals a potential movement toward authenticity as she recognizes this split between her true self and her socially assigned self.

Septimus Warren Smith, by its turn, is completely isolated from the society that surrounds him. His suicide can be interpreted as his ultimate assertion of control over his life in a world that denies him meaning: “He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did they want?”. His suicide becomes a complex moment of both resignation - since he does not feel he belongs to human existence anymore - and rebellion, as he rejects a world that has become unbearable yet asserts his agency.

In a final moment that emanates an outburst of anguish, the quotation below captures a poignant moment just before Septimus’s suicide, illustrating his inner turmoil and disintegration. Lucrezia, his wife, observes the unsettling change in his behavior as he spirals into madness.

> [T]he tears would run down his cheeks, which was to her the most dreadful thing of all, to see a man like Septimus, who had fought, who was brave, crying. And he would lie listening until suddenly he would cry that he was falling down, down into the flames! (Woolf, 1990, p. 63)

Heidegger’s analysis of temporality is foundational to his understanding of Dasein. For him, Dasein exists in three dimensions of time: the past (thrownness), the present (facticity), and the future (projection). True understanding of oneself requires an integration of these dimensions. Time is not a sequence of moments but a lived experience of past, present, and future as interconnected.

In summary, authenticity for Heidegger is the moment when Dasein becomes resolute, accepting its finite existence and making choices that are truly its own. Resoluteness requires a confrontation with anguish (*Angst*), as anguish exposes the groundlessness of existence.

Angst reveals to Dasein that life has no pre-given meaning. In response, Dasein can either flee into the comfort of *das Man* or face its freedom to choose its own possibilities.

Clarissa's encounter with Septimus's death becomes a moment of authenticity, since she recognizes the inevitability of death, she achieves a form of existential clarity. This moment symbolically connects with Peter's departure: "There is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect, thought Clarissa, watching Peter go." Here Clarissa's recognition of existential solitude also echoes Heidegger's idea that Dasein is ultimately alone in its confrontation with death.

Although time is a fundamental aspect of our analysis, it alone cannot fully convey the complexity surrounding anguish. Now it is time to focus on the importance of the literary space in the narrative. In this context, Lefebvre's analysis of how space is produced and experienced aligns with Woolf's depiction of London as an affective space that shapes and is shaped by the characters' internal experiences.

Woolf's narrative structure, which shifts fluidly between external movements through London and internal reflections of the characters, reveals profound intersections with Lefebvre's ideas on the production of space, the rhythms of the city, and the role of time in lived experience. Below, we explore these connections in depth.

Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* argues that space is not a neutral, empty container but a social product. Space is produced through the interplay of conceived space (an abstraction), perceived space (the material world), and lived space (subjective experience).

Space is socially produced, meaning it emerges from power relations (as the strong social division present in the story), historical processes (as the ones mentioned and analysed through Hobsbawm lens), and lived experiences (the individual experiences of characters, mainly Clarissa and Septimus). It is not merely a backdrop but an active force in shaping human subjectivity.

London, the setting for Woolf's narrative, is experienced differently by each character. Clarissa Dalloway moves through London as a wealthy, socially privileged woman, while

Septimus Warren Smith, a shell-shocked war veteran, experiences it as a site of pure anxiety, estrangement, and disorientation. Their movements through this space reveal its socially stratified nature.

Clarissa Dalloway would think: “Bond Street fascinated her; Bond Street early in the morning in the season; its flags flying; its shops; no splash; no glitter; one roll of tweed in the shop where her father had bought his suits for fifty years; a few pearls; salmon on an iceblock.”. In opposition, Septimus felt overwhelmed by the dynamics of London city: "It was at that moment, Rezia remarked, that the world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought." (Woolf, 1990)

Here, London as *lived space* reflects Clarissa's personal history and social status. Bond Street becomes a site of memory and habit, where space is shaped by her bourgeois lifestyle, while Septimus would feel unfit in every place of the city he stops by.

In Clarissa’s scene, Lefebvre would identify this space as simultaneously perceived (the physical street and shops), conceived (the planned, commercial purpose of Bond Street), and lived (Clarissa's personal associations and recollections). Clarissa’s movement through London reaffirms her participation in the rhythms and routines of urban bourgeois life, while Septimus’s erratic movements reveal his inability to synchronize with these rhythms.

In his book *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre (1992) explores the concept of rhythm as an analytical tool to understand the flows of everyday life. He distinguishes between cyclical rhythms, which are natural and repetitive patterns like day and night, and linear rhythms, which are socially constructed rhythms, such as work schedules or clock time.

The rhythm of *Mrs. Dalloway* is marked by the chiming of Big Ben, a recurring motif that punctuates the narrative, structuring the passage of time for the characters. Here, both in Space and Time, the clock will also set the pace of the story but also the progression of character’s anguish. Big Ben embodies a linear rhythm imposed on the city’s inhabitants, but this linearity contrasts with the internal, cyclical, and affective rhythms of the characters. The clock’s chime serves as a reminder of temporality, mortality, and the relentlessness of time, much like Lefebvre's emphasis on how rhythmic interruptions influence lived experience.

Remarkably, Woolf always brings the statement “The leaden circles dissolved in the air.” through the narrative. This famous line follows each chime of Big Ben and can be considered

a metaphor for the passage of time and its impact on consciousness. The word “leaden”, in a certain way, emphasizes the weight of the sound, but also suggests that time is always slipping away.

On the other hand, Clarissa’s subjective experience of time does not correspond to the rigidity of the clock. Instead, her consciousness moves rhythmically between past and present, mimicking Lefebvre’s cyclical rhythms. Septimus’s experience of time is even more disjointed, as his trauma disrupts also his synchronization with the rhythms of society. Septimus arrhythmia, caused by post-war trauma, places him outside the regular rhythms of the city, embodying Lefebvre’s concept of dissonance in rhythmic experience.

Lefebvre argues that time and space are not separate categories but intertwined dimensions. Space is not static; it unfolds over time, and the experience of time is always spatialized. This synthesis of time and space echoes Woolf’s method of constructing a single day as a microcosm of a lifetime, where memories and future anticipations fold into the anguishes of the present moment.

Woolf’s entire novel takes place over the course of one day, but within that single day, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith experience time in non-linear ways. Clarissa recalls moments from the past (Bourton) while also projecting into the future (her party), embodying what Lefebvre would call *lived time*. The past is not "behind" her, nor is the future "ahead"; both coexist within the present. This folding of past, present, and future into one moment corresponds to Lefebvre’s notion of *time as space*.

After knowing about Septimus death “She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away. [...] He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She must assemble.” Clarissa’s reflection can be considered a convergence of time and space. In Lefebvre’s terms, the space of the party (conceived space) becomes a space of existential confrontation (lived space) as Clarissa recognizes her shared mortality with Septimus. The past (his suicide) ruptures the present, shaping her awareness of her future (death). Lefebvre's theory highlights how moments of spatial proximity (the space of the party) also create temporal proximities, as death, and consequently anguish, becomes present in the midst of celebration.

Finally, for Lefebvre, space is also experienced through the body, because movement, sensation, and perception are embodied acts that shape the experience of space. The body is

not a passive recipient of space; it actively produces and transforms space through its movements. This is the reason why we might consider Clarissa's body as a central site for the production of space. Her walk through London is not passive; instead, it is an act of spatial production. Her sensory engagement with the city (the sight of flowers, the sound of traffic, the chime of Big Ben) creates lived space as Lefebvre defines it. Clarissa's physical movement is echoed in the rhythmic pulse of her thoughts, which traverse space and time simultaneously.

Clarissa's movement through London parallels the spatial experiences Lefebvre describes. "She felt like a nun who had left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions." Her path is not random; it reflects her social position, her past experiences, and her present desires. Her reference to "old devotions" invokes the repetition of past routines, echoing Lefebvre's notion of spatial rhythms that are both cyclical (rituals) and linear (movement through streets). And, again, recovering the psychoanalytic perspective for this study, repetition is an unconscious act that may be linked to anguish, as developed in previous sections.

On the other part of the narrative, Septimus's space, both public and private, is permeated by his mental anguish, as his fragmented perception of space becomes an expression of his disconnection from the world. Lefebvre's concept of how individuals move through and interact with space is significant in understanding Septimus's constant mental movement through spaces of horror, escape, and eventual destruction. His final moments are a tragic manifestation of how space, when disconnected from subjective meaning, can become suffocating and ultimately lead to despair.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of *Mrs Dalloway* in this investigation has highlighted the depth of Virginia Woolf's engagement with the representations of the subjective human experience, shaped by time and space, in a specific historical moment. In the novel, anguish comes to be the central product of those interactions, taking into account the broader historical and theoretical frameworks that define modern subjectivity. Through the lenses of Lacan's psychoanalysis, Heidegger's existential philosophy, Lefebvre's spatial theory and Hobsbawm's Age of

Catastrophe, this study has shown how Woolf's narrative captures the fractured consciousness of individuals shaped by the pressures of modernity, war and social change.

Woolf's treatment of time reflects a world in crisis, rejecting linear chronology in favour of an elastic temporality that reflects both the instability of the self in face of several social changes and the anxieties of a century marked by successive ruptures. The novel's fluid movement between past and present - memory and perception - echoes Heidegger's notion of being-toward-death, as characters grapple with the finitude of existence and the haunting presence of what has been lost. The clearest examples of it would be Septimus Warren Smith's descent into despair, exposing the alienation of the modern subject, while Clarissa Dalloway's quiet meditations on life and ageing, embodying the tension between fleeting joy and the weight of existential awareness. Consequently, in *Mrs Dalloway*, time is not simply experienced but endured, underlining Woolf's acute sensitivity to the anxieties that define both personal and historical moments of transition.

Similarly, space in the novel is never neutral. As Lefebvre argues, space is produced and lived - it is ideological, structured by power and social relations. These analyzes open the readers' eyes to see Woolf's London as a city of movement, borders and silent exclusions, where characters may navigate both physical streets and the invisible constraints of class, gender and trauma. Clarissa's party, happening in the end of the novel, seemingly a moment of cohesion, ultimately reinforces the social hierarchies that shape her world, while Septimus's tragic fate highlights how certain individuals are pushed to the margins, and also how their suffering rendered invisible within the ordered spaces of post-war Britain. In this sense, Woolf's spatial awareness transcends mere geography to reflect the tensions between belonging and isolation, visibility and erasure.

At the heart of these tensions lies the complex, but harmonic, interplay of anxiety and desire - Lacan's fundamental dialectic of the subject. Woolf's characters, caught between the weight of the past and the uncertainty of the future, embody the restless oscillation between desire and loss, fulfillment and emptiness. Throughout the narrative, desire drives them forward, but it is always elusive, shaped by the symbolic structures that define their world. Clarissa's nostalgia for lost possibilities, Peter Walsh's unfulfilled romantic idealism, and Septimus's desperate need for meaning all underscore the novel's deep engagement with the fragmented nature of the self.

Ultimately, Mrs Dalloway is more than a portrait of individual lives; it is a meditation on the human condition within the tumult of the 20th Century. Hobsbawm's Age of Catastrophe - a period of war, crisis and profound change - provides the historical backdrop against which Woolf's characters struggle to reconcile personal identity with a world in flux. Their private anguish is inextricably linked to the wider social and political upheavals that shape their reality, making Woolf's novel not only a reflection of its time but a timeless exploration of modern existence itself. By interweaving Woolf's literary vision with the philosophical, psychoanalytic and historical frameworks explored in this study, *Mrs Dalloway* emerges as a profound investigation into what it means to live, desire and endure in a world where both time and space remain uncertain, yet inescapably defining forces.

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