

Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway (1925)* takes place over the course of one June day in the life of a fashionable, middle-aged lady, Clarissa Dalloway. The setting is London in 1923, and Clarissa lives in London with her husband – a Member of Parliament – and their teenage daughter. The novel does not tell a story; instead, the narration follows the characters, who think, interact and walk about London as the hours of the day go by, accompanied by the chimes of Big Ben.

Alongside Clarissa, the novel focuses on the figure of a young man, Septimus Small, who commits suicide because his mind has been shattered by his experiences in World War I. Clarissa learns about this tragic event during a party and withdraws to a small room in silent meditation on the meaning of life, death and time.

Clarissa and Peter thirty years after (from Part I)

It is mid-morning. Clarissa has returned home after buying some flowers, and receives a visit from a man she has not seen for about thirty years. The time is the focus of the text: the reader enters the characters' minds and shares the flow of their consciousness, where memories from the past and impressions of the present moment are contemporary and overlap.

“And how are you?” said Peter Walsh, positively trembling; taking both her hands; kissing both her hands. She's grown older, he thought, sitting down. I shan't tell her anything about it, he thought, for she's grown older. She's looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him, though he had kissed her hands. Putting his hand into his pocket, he took out a large pocket-knife and half opened the blade.

Exactly the same, thought Clarissa; the same queer¹ look; the same check suit²; a little out of the straight³ his face is, a little thinner, dryer, perhaps, but he looks awfully⁴ well, and just the same.

“How heavenly it is to see you again!” she exclaimed. He had his knife out. That's so like him⁵, she thought. He had only reached town last night, he said; would have to go down into the country at once; and how was everything, how was everybody – Richard⁶? Elizabeth⁷?

“And what's all this?” he said, tilting⁸ his pen-knife towards her green dress.

He's very well dressed, thought Clarissa; yet he always criticises me.

Here she is mending her dress; mending her dress as usual, he thought; here she's been sitting all the time I've been in India; mending her dress; playing about; going to parties; running to the House⁹ and back and all that, he thought, growing more and more irritated, more and more agitated, for there's nothing in the world so bad for some women as marriage, he thought; and politics; and having a Conservative husband, like the admirable Richard. So it is, so it is, he thought, shutting his knife with a snap¹⁰.

“Richard's very well. Richard's at a Committee,” said Clarissa.

And she opened her scissors, and said, did he mind her just finishing what she was doing to her dress, for they had a party that night?

“Which I shan't ask you to,” she said. “My dear Peter!” she said.

But it was delicious to hear her say that – my dear Peter! Indeed, it was all so delicious – the silver, the chairs; all so delicious!

Why wouldn't she ask him to her party? he asked.

Now of course, thought Clarissa, he's enchanting! perfectly enchanting! Now I remember how impossible it was ever to make up my mind – and why did I make up my mind – not to marry him, she wondered, that awful summer?

1. **queer:** strange.

2. **check suit:** suit made with cloth which had a pattern of squares.

3. **out of the straight:** (it. *storta*).

4. **awfully:** (informal) very.

5. **like him:** typical of him.

6. **Richard:** Clarissa's husband.

7. **Elizabeth:** Clarissa's daughter.

8. **tilting:** (it. *inclinando*).

9. **the House:** the House of Commons.

10. **snap:** (it. *colpo secco*).

“But it’s so extraordinary that you should have come this morning!” she cried, putting her hands, one on top of another, down on her dress.

“Do you remember,” she said, “how the blinds¹¹ used to flap¹² at Bourton¹³?”

“They did,” he said; and he remembered breakfasting alone, very awkwardly, with her father; who had died; and he had not written to Clarissa. But he had never got on well with old Parry, that querulous, weak-kneed¹⁴ old man, Clarissa’s father, Justin Parry.

“I often wish I’d got on better with your father,” he said.

“But he never liked any one who – our friends,” said Clarissa; and could have bitten her tongue for thus reminding Peter that he had wanted to marry her.

Of course I did, thought Peter; it almost broke my heart too, he thought; and was overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked at from a terrace, ghastly¹⁵ beautiful with light from the sunken day. I was more unhappy than I’ve ever been since, he thought.

11. blinds: window shades; coverings that can be drawn up or down over windows.

12. to flap: to move noisily.

13. Bourton: her family’s summer residence.

14. weak-kneed: weak, spineless.

15. ghastly: dreadful.

Other suggestions:

- Time as flashback storytelling: Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), chapter I
- Time as memory: Ian Mc Ewan, *Child in Time* (1987), chapter I
- Time as stream of consciousness: James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1921), episode 5
- Time as suspense: Ernest Hemingway, *The Killers* (1927)
- Time as anxious waiting: Katherine Mansfield, *The Singing Lesson* (1922)