

Discussion Questions for Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway"

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1. Many English novels in the Victorian and Edwardian period focus on young girls as they emerge into womanhood and experience a first love or embark on marriage. "Mrs. Dalloway," instead, focuses on a middle-aged woman who has

the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and other solemn progress with the rest of them; up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway.

Does Clarissa Dalloway have impact on society beyond giving nice parties? How do the women in the novel show they are just as talented as the men despite societal barriers preventing them from realizing their full potential? Are Clarissa and Sally really emotionally sterile in 1923, unlike their younger, passionate selves?

2. Who was Clarissa really in love with as a youth? Richard Dalloway? Peter Walsh? Sally Seton?
3. Is the city of London a character in the novel? What is the symbolism of the famous clock, Big Ben?
4. The stream-of-consciousness technique (direct and indirect interior monologue, omniscient description, and soliloquy) takes us from character to character, sometimes separating shifting points of view with the end of a paragraph. How did this style affect the story Virginia Woolf is telling? Does the shifting point-of-view make the novel more realistic? Do the time shifts (within the context of a single day in June 1923) present a more subjective than objective viewpoint?
5. Virginia Woolf's "A Writer's Diary" describes a special literary technique the author described as a "tunneling process, which I tell the past by installments" and eventually digs out of the tunnels to connect the characters. Can you give some examples of this technique in Mrs. Dalloway? How does this technique affect the action of the novel?
6. In Woolf's essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," the author posited that "in or about December 1910, human character changed." She expanded the thought by stating that a great shift in political and social hierarchies away from Victorian mores provided more social mobility, access to education, and the rise of the middle class. She felt that the inner lives of average people, not just the nobility, was worth a look. How did the author's viewpoint appear in "Mrs. Dalloway?" How does the author portray "the establishment (the English Empire, royalty, upper class, etc.)?"
7. Is there a villain in "Mrs. Dalloway?"
8. The author struggled with mental illness throughout her life and chose to end her life in 1941 to avoid another breakdown. How did she use the character of Septimus Smith, a World War I soldier experiencing severe shell shock and mental illness, to present her personal experiences with hallucinations and mistrust of the then very-unhelpful psychiatric profession? Does Septimus represent the "other side" of Clarissa? If the author had ended the book with Clarissa's suicide, would the novel have been as effective?

Sources:

"Mrs. Dalloway: Virginia Woolf's Modernist Breakthrough" by Peter Filkins

"Bright Notes Study Guide to Mrs Dalloway and To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf"