

## Personal Meaning and Landscape in *Mrs. Dalloway*: An Ecocritical Study

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### Abstract

*This research paper applies an ecocritical perspective to Virginia Woolf's novel Mrs. Dalloway and studies how nature has been used to describe the personal feelings of the characters, both major and minor, in the context of industrialization and post-World War 1 era in London. Through the ecocritical lens, this paper explores how Woolf links natural elements i.e., flowers, trees and sky with her writing techniques of the stream of consciousness and inner monologue to reflect the psychological self of different characters. The ideas presented by the theorist Richard Kerridge, that of a possible 'poetic engagement' of literature with the natural world in an industrialized era, and Britain's nature as a common self-referent have been taken as the framework for this research. The paper closely analyses the text of the novel, focusing on the statements that link nature with the characters' emotions, and draws to a conclusion claiming that this recurrence of nature in Mrs. Dalloway is a deliberate act on the author's part to at least figuratively preserve nature in a time period that has destroyed as well as pushed nature into the background.*

**Keywords:** *England, industrialization, nature, personal meaning, World War*

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### Introduction

This study Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) offers a rich tapestry of narrative that intertwines the personal and the public, exploring themes of time, identity, and social structures through a single day in the life of its protagonist, Clarissa Dalloway. Central to this exploration is the interplay between personal meaning and the urban landscape of London, which Woolf employs not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic force influencing the characters' inner lives and existential quests. This paper aims to conduct an ecocritical study of *Mrs. Dalloway*, focusing on

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how the urban environment and its various facets contribute to the formation of personal meaning and identity within the novel. Ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment, offers a lens through which to analyse the interactions between individuals and their surroundings, highlighting how the landscape of London impacts and reflects the characters' inner experiences and societal roles.

Richard Kerridge's theory of ecocriticism offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between literature and the environment. Kerridge, a prominent figure in the field, emphasizes the importance of examining how literary texts reflect and shape human perceptions of nature. His approach integrates an analysis of how environmental concerns are embedded within literary works and how these concerns interact with broader ecological issues. Kerridge argues that literature serves not only as a mirror reflecting environmental realities but also as a lens through which we can re-evaluate our connections with the natural world. He highlights that literary representations of nature can both reinforce and challenge existing attitudes towards environmental conservation and sustainability. By focusing on the interplay between narrative and ecological awareness, Kerridge's theory encourages a critical examination of how storytelling influences and is influenced by environmental values and practices. This perspective underscores the potential of literature to contribute to environmental discourse and foster a deeper understanding of our place within the natural world.

This research article argues that the persistent use of nature imagery in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is not merely a poetic tool to help lend literary value to the novel, rather is a deliberate act on the part of the author to preserve nature, even if only figuratively. Moreover, it asserts that the need to preserve nature arises from the observation of an England that is both industrialized and war-stricken, having damaged its ecosystem to a larger extent or having artificialized the remaining few

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natural habitats. By making her characters associate their personal feelings with nature even after industrialization and war have harmed it, Virginia Woolf makes nature re-emerge as an entity that cannot die even if subjected to eco-terrorism, affirming that even after nature has become a “voiceless casualty of war” as Tait Keller puts it in his essay, *Destruction of Ecosystem*, it continues to sustain in the minds of the people.

In an era of academic research that places emphasis on bringing indigenous texts under academic scrutiny, a British novel has been taken as the primary text because it treats nature not as a region-specific entity but as one that is deeply interconnected with the human species in general and cannot be rendered separate from it. Furthermore, industrialization and war have become global phenomena, and so has the receding nature as a consequence of these phenomena. By not letting nature diminish in the wake of man-induced environmental disasters, *Mrs. Dalloway* becomes a lesson for the entire world, teaching people across geographies to retain nature, even if only in their very subjective thoughts.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To analyse the various ways in which Virginia Woolf employs natural imagery to reflect the emotional states of her characters, identifying specific literary techniques and patterns used to correlate natural elements with psychological experiences.
2. To evaluate the significance of natural imagery in representing the processes of pain and healing in Woolf’s characters, comparing its effectiveness to other literary symbols and assessing how this imagery contributes to the thematic development of the narrative.
3. To develop a theoretical framework incorporating contemporary ecological or psychological theories to reinterpret Woolf’s use of nature imagery, aiming to

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create new perspectives on how this imagery enhances the portrayal of characters' innermost thoughts and emotions.

### **Research Questions**

1. How does Woolf use nature to describe the emotional states of different characters?
2. What role does nature play in the process of pain and healing of the characters?
3. Why does Woolf feel the need to incorporate nature imagery while describing her character's innermost thoughts?

### **Literature Review**

In the wealth of scholarship available on this modern novel, ample work emerges studying the recurrent use of nature in it. However, the limitations of those researches lie in their focus being reduced to female characters most of the time. One example is the research article, *Women, Nature, Culture: Ecological Discourse in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway*. In this article, Farzaneh Rezanezhad argues that the female characters in the novel are closer to nature than the male characters, owing to the inherent similarities between nature and the female gender (Rezanezhad, 2014). Katherine Sedon, in her paper, *Moments of Aging: Revising Mother Nature in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway*, also associates the imagery of nature with the female characters only and discusses how nature this imagery in the novel symbolizes the ageing female characters and emphasizes the way Woolf has changed the image of Mother Nature from a young woman to an old one (Sedon, 2011). Melissa Bagley's paper, *Nature and the Nation in Mrs. Dalloway*, does not apply the theory of ecocriticism explicitly but uses the term "biological language" to refer to the nature imagery and stretches the application of the imagery across the practices of the nation as well, an example of which is as follows:

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June had drawn out every leaf on the trees. The mothers of Pimlico gave suck to their young. Messages were passing from the Fleet to the Admiralty. Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that. (Woolf, 1996, p. 9)

Ecocriticism traditionally focuses on rural and natural landscapes, but recent scholarship has expanded this field to include urban environments, recognizing that cities also play a crucial role in shaping human experience and identity. Key works such as *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Glotfelty, 1996), and *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard (Garrard, 2014), provide foundational perspectives on how human interactions with both natural and built environments influence literary narratives. In urban contexts, ecocriticism examines how cityscapes impact characters' psyches and identities, offering insights into the relationship between urban space and personal meaning (Liu, 2020; Porter, 2022).

Woolf's writing frequently engages with the city as more than just a setting but as a living, breathing entity that interacts with the characters. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, London is not a mere backdrop but an integral element that shapes the narrative and the characters' internal worlds. Scholars such as Jane Goldman in *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace* and Rachel Bowlby in *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinies* have explored how Woolf's portrayal of London reflects her modernist concerns with fragmentation and coherence. The city's omnipresence in the novel reflects the complexities of early 20<sup>th</sup> century urban life and its effects on individual consciousness (Lévêque, 2020).

Modernist literature often explores the intersection of personal meaning and landscape through fragmented narratives and stream-of-consciousness techniques. Critics like Bell (1997) in *Literature, Modernism, and Myth: Belief and*

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*Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* argue that modernist texts frequently use landscapes to mirror and influence characters' inner lives. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the depiction of London as a physical space and a symbol of societal norms contributes to the novel's exploration of personal identity and existential reflection. The city's various layers—its historical significance, social stratifications, and its sensory experiences—are intricately woven into the characters' perceptions and self-understandings.

Recent studies have increasingly recognized Woolf's engagement with ecological themes, even within the urban context. In *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group: A Bibliography* by H.M. Daleski, Woolf's sensitivity to environmental elements, including urban settings, is highlighted. Woolf's writing reflects a deep awareness of the interconnectedness between individuals and their environments, a notion central to ecocriticism. Her portrayal of London in *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates the intricate relationship between personal experience and the physical world, underscoring how urban landscapes can shape and reflect personal and collective identities.

### **Research Gap**

This research article differs from the previous works carried out on *Mrs Dalloway* all these works in the manner that it attempts to provide logical reasoning for the use of natural imagery. Moreover, instead of focusing on the female characters only, it pays attention to all the victims of war and industrialization who find solace in connecting their selves with nature, when much of it is not available in its raw form. Thirdly, by applying an ecocritical perspective, this article gives nature the importance that environmental activists from various fields strive to establish by claiming it as equal to human beings rather than treating it as inferior to them. To elaborate, human beings associating their feelings with nature is proof of nature being their essential counter-part instead of being their subordinate that may be subjected to ignorance or eco-terrorism.

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### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Considering the modern, post-World War 1 setting of the novel coupled with its setting in an industrialized England, the article takes Richard Kerridge's idea of literature's "poetic engagement" with the natural world in the age of industrialization as its particular theoretical strand from within the framework of ecocriticism. Considering that ecocriticism seeks to establish the importance of nature, the implementation of this theory in this study helps propagate the idea that the significance of nature lies in the fact that even after war, which destroys nature and industrialization that takes people away from nature, people still resort to it, even if only in their minds, for expressing their feelings.

Another reason why Richard Kerridge's work serves as the theoretical framework for this study is because the theorist seeks to study how British authors have taken the country's natural environment, "the landscapes and the wildlife – as a possession held in common" after the war, helping the people "enjoy after their wartime sacrifices" (Kerridge, 2015, p. 7).

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology carried out for this study involves a close textual analysis of the novel, with a particular focus on lines and passages in which the characters' innermost feelings related with nature. The analysis moves from the beginning of the novel to its end, focusing on the dialogues and monologues of all the characters, regardless of their significance in the plot, which means that not only statements that connect feelings and nature of the important characters of the text have been highlighted, but those of the minor characters have also been examined.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Indeed, it is remarkable how nature goes on existing, unofficially, as it were, in

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the very heart of London. I have seen a kestrel flying over the Deptford gasworks, and I have heard a first rate performance by a black bird in the Euston Road. There must be some hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of birds living inside the four-mile radius, and it is a rather pleasing thought that none of them pays a halfpenny of rent. (Finch and Elder,2002, pp. 505-506)

*Mrs. Dalloway*, as a novel, is fraught with images of nature that seem to help the characters describe their feelings and emotions. However, it is also to be noted that these feelings may not always emerge as positive ones. Any feeling, be it of love or hatred, has been expressed through the incorporation of one or the other element of nature. This establishes the idea that regardless of the kind of feelings, nature is there as proof of the fact that it is connected with the extremely subjective feelings of people, rooted in their personalities, very much like a tree itself: inseparable and difficult to uproot, even if the socio-political happenings are adamant at pushing nature into the background.

London, as we have it in the initial pages of the novel, is a city fraught with “motor cars, omnibuses, vans.....and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead” (Woolf, 1996, p. 6), hence emerging as a city that has left behind its rawness and changed a lot from what once was the Victorian London boasting of meadows and trails where people would keep strolling without any automobile in sight. “The swathes of meadow that would have been seen in English landscapes in the past have now been lost to widespread modern and intensive farming and horticultural practices.” (Protecting England’s Meadows) Amidst this industrialization, one surmises few chances of the characters coming across nature and revelling in it, but a few lines after this paragraph, Mrs. Dalloway enters a park and observes “the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-swimming happy ducks” (Woolf, 1996, p. 7). The setting of the park and the aura it evokes provides instant comfort to Mrs. Dalloway, pointing towards the fact that nature or its gardened forms



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have become more of secluded corners which can help people spend their time away from the irritating rush of the traffic. However, they are no more imbued in the landscape of England, the kind of which William Wordsworth would say: “was just outside the window”. The novel under scrutiny gives out the idea that in the fully industrialized London, one had to cross roads packed with cars to reach a place that would look like a simulation of a natural setting. Moreover, this comforting imagery of nature evokes the need for peace which Mrs. Dalloway had been certainly looking for, it catches her eye and heart and makes a place in her thoughts the moment she enters the park.

While these initial passages of the novel introduce the idea that there is a need for nature in the lives of the people of London, the proceeding passages develop that idea in the way that as the story progresses and the characters are exposed, natural elements keep coming to the fore in the minds of the characters, helping them satisfactorily and adequately describe their feelings. A character in the novel, Miss Kilman, is someone with whom Mrs. Dalloway is closely linked, not to ignore the fact that the relationship is one of hatred and disgust on Clarissa’s part. The hatred for Miss Kilman is a strong-rooted one and, even for expression, also resorts to imagery of nature, but not as a pleasant one.

It rasped her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! to hear twigs cracking and feel hooves planted down in that leaf-encumbered-forest, the soul...as if indeed there were a monster grubbing at the roots, as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self-love! this hatred! (Woolf, 1996, p. 15)

The soul has been associated with a “leaf-encumbered-forest” and while describing emotions of intense hatred, the imagery that has been used is of raw nature and “twigs cracking”. It is also interesting to note that when it comes to relationships that one is not desirous of keeping, the imagery that emerges is of dying natural elements, not the ones one wants to see in full bloom.

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Lucrezia and Septimus are also two significant characters in the novel. If *Mrs. Dalloway* is taken as a novel representing a war-inflicted society, Septimus presents himself as the perfect example of understanding the consequences, for he is a character who has not only lost a friend in the war, but also has faith in civilization. Consequently, his wife also suffers, for she cannot live a good matrimonial life with someone who is mentally not well. After all the sufferings the couple has gone through; when Rezia wishes to recall the good days of their marriage, it is their relation's link with nature which is recalled. It is the season which she remembers, and thus the wordings go like this: "Only last autumn she and Septimus had stood on the Embankment wrapped in the same cloak and, Septimus reading a paper instead of talking, she had snatched it from him and laughed in the old man's face who saw them" (Woolf, 1996, p. 19). Now that the couple's life has been destroyed by the war, it is again nature which is thought of as a remedy. Rezia "must take him away into some park." (Woolf, 1996, p. 19) Septimus, in his deep thoughts, also resorts to nature when he has to draw links between things. This can be justified in the way that a man who has seen the atrocities of war yearns for nature, even if it is a mere grasshopper with which some association is to be established. His wife's voice seems to him "like a grasshopper's, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke." (Woolf, 1996, p. 25) Septimus, whose entire personality has been badly affected by the war, proves Richard Kerridge's idea right that after the war, it was nature which to some extent, provided a new identity to the people who had lost faith in everything owing to the atrocities of the war. Nature, in those times, according to Richard Kerridge, "was one constituent of a new sense of national identity, a culture of self-reference shared by all" (Kerridge, 2015, p. 7) Rezia, who takes her husband to parks so that he may feel better, herself also seeks solace in nature, even if in Peter Barry's words, it is a refined or cultured form of nature. "I am alone; I am alone! she cried, by the fountain in Regent's park" (Woolf, 1996, p. 28). Water, in ecocritical studies, is also thought

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of as a symbol of providing an understanding of life's secrets (Classen, 2017). Standing by the fountain and letting her heart out can be a foreboding of the fact that Septimus's life will come to an end and Lucrezia will have to stay alone forever. The darkness and fear inside Rezia's heart, however, are not described using cultured nature, but in the following manner: "... as perhaps at midnight, when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape...lying cloudy...and the hills had no names...such was her darkness..." (Woolf, 1996, p. 28). These lines suggest that for a lover, losing a beloved is like losing identity, and therefore, she considers herself as a raw, unnamed element of nature.

Sally Seton is also an unavoidable character. Standing as a character separate from that of Clarissa, she provides us with more insight into Clarissa's character, i.e. her bisexual tendencies, for it is Sally with whom Clarissa had had an implicit relationship before marriage and it was with Sally that she had shared a French kiss. When Clarissa is thinking of her tendency of "yielding to the charm of a woman", it is Sally about whom she is thinking. (Woolf, 1996, p. 36) What Clarissa remembers about Sally is also recalled with a lot of mentioning of flowers. While "Sally's power was amazing...There was her way with flowers, for instance", it was in Bourton while walking outdoors that "Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips". (Woolf, 1996, p. 38-40) When Sally makes her appearance in Clarissa's party, she is thought of as a "bird or air ball that has flown in, attached itself for a moment to a bramble" (Woolf, 1996, p. 40). Here, it becomes highly important to refer to the theorist again, for when it comes to the birds of Britain, Richard Kerridge believes that the species has come to reveal the deepest crevices of the characters of Britain's writings.

Strong emotions that the writing arouses with its glancing references to the war attach also to the birds, giving meaning to the drama of their lives and the real revelations about those lives that the writing provides. The human meaning with

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which the writing imbues the birds becomes a motive for further interest in the facts of their lives. (Kerridge, 1996, p. 6)

A more elaborate and easy way to comprehend the connection between birds and the people living on the earth would be that when people could not find a way to connect their deep desires with a damaged view of the earth in front of them, they resorted to what was there in the sky, and started associating their personal feelings with the birds, skies or the top-most branches of the trees.

How nature has been used to describe Richard and Peter Walsh, two significant men in Clarissa's life is equally important to discuss. Richard Dalloway is someone to whom Clarissa feels that she owes a lot, like a very conventional house-wife. Her house, "the gay sounds", "the green lights", "the cook even whistling" are phenomena which are of significance to Clarissa and which she believes have been given to her by "Richard her husband, who was the foundation of it..." (Woolf, 1996, p. 33). Thinking of Richard and the facilities he has provided her with, Clarissa says, using free indirect discourse, "how moments like this are buds on the tree of life, flowers of darkness they are, she thought (as if some lovely rose had blossomed for her eyes only" (Woolf, 1996, p. 33). One is inclined to think of Peter as someone rejected by Clarissa because he could not have provided her with comfort and aesthetically pleasing moments because "however beautiful the day might be, and the trees and the grass, and the little girl in Pink - Peter never saw a thing of all that." (Woolf, 1996, p. 9). Or, basically, the idea inherent in these lines may be that Peter's lack of aesthetics pertaining to nature makes him someone not worth loving, for his unappreciative attitude towards nature but a glimpse of his personality that it is insensitive, very much like the perpetrators of the war, those who are not needed in anyone's life but on the other hand, for Richard, beauty does hold some significance. When he observes his daughter at the party, his feelings are described in the following words: "For her father had been looking at her, as he stood talking to the

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Bradshaws, and he had thought to himself who is that lovely girl? And suddenly he realized that it was his Elizabeth, and he had not recognized her, she looked so lovely in her pink frock.” (Woolf, 1996, p. 213)

The fact that the novel concludes with a reconciliation of two characters who hold a sense of beauty and have the ability to take sources from nature in order to define that beauty tells that Virginia Woolf subtly posits the need to keep such relationships intact in which both the partners possess an association with nature. By and large, it may mean that in an era that is characterized by almost no artificialized nature, those people need to be kept in hearts and homes who know what raw nature looked like once, for they can connect their emotions with trees, flowers, birds and an open, smokeless sky, also suggesting that they have not entirely accepted an industrialized and war-stricken London, and thus are important personalities to retain in a geographical land that is bearing the brunt of ignorance towards nature.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, this research paper emphasizes the pivotal role that nature plays in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* as a reflection of the characters' inner lives within the context of early 20th-century London. By employing an ecocritical approach, it becomes evident that Woolf deliberately intertwines natural imagery—such as flowers, trees, and the sky—with the stream of consciousness and inner monologue techniques to evoke and amplify the emotional states of her characters. Through this interplay, Woolf highlights the contrast between the encroaching industrialization and the enduring presence of the natural world and demonstrates a nuanced form of 'poetic engagement' with nature, as proposed by Richard Kerridge. This deliberate recurrence of natural elements serves as a symbolic preservation of nature, offering a form of resistance against its marginalization in a rapidly modernizing society. Ultimately, Woolf’s integration of nature into the fabric of her narrative provides a poignant commentary on her characters' psychological and existential struggles, while

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also reflecting broader concerns about the relationship between humanity and the natural world during a time of significant change.

To further enhance our understanding of Virginia Woolf's use of natural imagery in *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is recommended that future research explore several avenues. First, a comparative analysis of Woolf's ecological motifs with those in other modernist literature could reveal whether her approach to nature reflects broader literary trends or unique personal techniques. Additionally, delving deeper into the historical context of early 20th-century London—particularly the impacts of industrialization on environmental perceptions—could provide a richer backdrop for interpreting Woolf's thematic concerns. Integrating other theoretical frameworks, such as feminist or psychoanalytic perspectives, might also uncover additional dimensions of Woolf's portrayal of nature and its interplay with character psychology. Moreover, examining contemporary and modern audience responses to Woolf's environmental themes could offer insights into the enduring relevance of her work. Finally, exploring how Woolf's natural imagery has been adapted in various media forms, such as film or theatre, could shed light on how her ecological concerns continue to resonate and evolve. Engaging with these recommendations would deepen our appreciation of Woolf's literary craft and its commentary on humanity's evolving relationship with nature.

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