

Teachers' Notes

Curriculum subject: English Literature

Key Stage: 4 and 5

Author / Text: Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*

Theme: A woman on the edge

Rationale

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is one of the most innovative novels in the history of the genre. In these activities, students will use manuscript drafts, notebooks and essays to study Woolf's experimentation with form and use of language during the lengthy process of composition. They will also consider the work in the context of post-First World War Britain, making imaginative links with other aspects of modernism, and producing their own creative writing.

Content**Literary and historical sources from the site:**

- [Manuscript draft of *Mrs Dalloway*/*The Hours* \(1923–24\)](#)
- [Virginia Woolf's travel and literary notebook \(1906–09\)](#)
- ['Street Haunting', an essay by Virginia Woolf \(1930\)](#)
- ['Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', an essay by Virginia Woolf \(1924\)](#)
- [First edition of *Ulysses* by James Joyce, published by Shakespeare and Company \(1922\)](#)

Recommended reading:

- [Exploring consciousness and the modern: an introduction to *Mrs Dalloway*](#) by Elaine Showalter
- [Virginia Woolf's London](#) by David Bradshaw
- [Virginia Woolf and the First World War](#) by David Bradshaw
- *Mrs Dalloway* / *Virginia Woolf*; with an introduction and notes by Elaine Showalter (London: Penguin, 2000)

External links:

- [Google Maps, for map of London](#)
- [Checklist of the paintings in the 1910 exhibition, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*](#)

Key questions

- How does Woolf experiment with form and structure in her writing?
- How does *Mrs Dalloway* reflect the changes in society after the First World War?
- How does Woolf's writing link to other aspects of modernism?

Activities

- 1) Look at the [Manuscript draft of Mrs Dalloway/The Hours \(1923–24\)](#). The first page (f. 5r) starts with no mention of the eponymous heroine.
 - In what other ways does this draft opening differ from the final version?
 - What do you think is the effect of Woolf's ultimate decision to begin with 'Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself'?
 - On the next page of the manuscript (f. 6r), read the paragraph beginning 'A patter like the flutter in a wood'. This appears much later in the final novel – 'A patter like the patter of leaves in a wood came from behind' (p. 55 in the 2004 Penguin edition), when Peter Walshe encounters the cadets marching to the Cenotaph. What is the significance of this passage and how does it link to the recurring imagery of trees and the theme of war?
 - You will see that Woolf originally titled the novel 'The Hours', drawing attention to the theme of time. Note where the references to Big Ben occur in the narrative. Consider how Woolf was trying to challenge the traditional linear style of narration by looking at her essay, '[Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown](#)'. Then write an essay plan on Woolf's use of time as a unifying structural device.
- 2) In the essay, '[Street Haunting](#)', the narrator explores the imaginative act of dipping in and out of people's minds as they move through the city streets. Clarissa Dalloway probably starts her walk to Mulberry's at around 10am on a June morning. Read David Bradshaw's essay on [Virginia Woolf's London](#) and use a [map of London](#) to trace Clarissa's route. Then choose one street and imagine two characters that haunt it today. Now write a single page as a stream of consciousness, entering the minds of these characters as you take your walk.
- 3) In her essay, '[Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown](#)', Woolf writes about the changes between two generations of writers and the characteristics of modernity. Who are Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown? Can you find any other characters in *Mrs Dalloway* who might remind you of Mrs Brown?
 - Woolf links the birth of modernity to [an exhibition of Manet and the Post-Impressionists in 1910](#). Can you think of any similarities between *Mrs Dalloway* and other art forms such as painting and cinema? You might want to consider Woolf's symbolic use of colour and innovative narrative techniques.

- 4) When [writing about her travels in Turkey](#), Woolf describes the excitement of the 'first dive into a new town'. Compare Woolf's use of the similar active verb 'plunge' twice on pp. 40–41 of *Mrs Dalloway* with its use in the opening of the novel. What aspect of Clarissa's character does Woolf emphasise by this choice of language?
- In her diary on 15 October 1923, Woolf writes that she thinks Clarissa Dalloway 'too glittering and tinsely'. Discuss whether you believe this observation is still true of Clarissa's character in the final version.

Extension activities

- *Mrs Dalloway* started as a short story in 1922 and Woolf spent a long time carefully crafting it over the next three years. Initially she had intended to end the book with the death of Clarissa. However, in the final version, it is Septimus who kills himself. A D Moody (in *Virginia Woolf*, 1963) sees his suicide as 'the objective image of the death of [Clarissa's] soul'. Consider the relationship between these two characters and how they function in the structure of the novel.
- Elaine Showalter ends her [essay on Mrs Dalloway](#) by calling it a 'compassionate and optimistic novel'. Do you agree with this? In pairs, choose another two adjectives which you feel describe the novel more accurately, and defend your choices with supporting extracts.
- Woolf was reading James Joyce's novel [Ulysses](#) when she began *Mrs Dalloway*. Can you find evidence of how this book may have influenced her? Could Leopold Bloom and Clarissa Dalloway be understood as individuals and yet representative of the condition of post-war society?