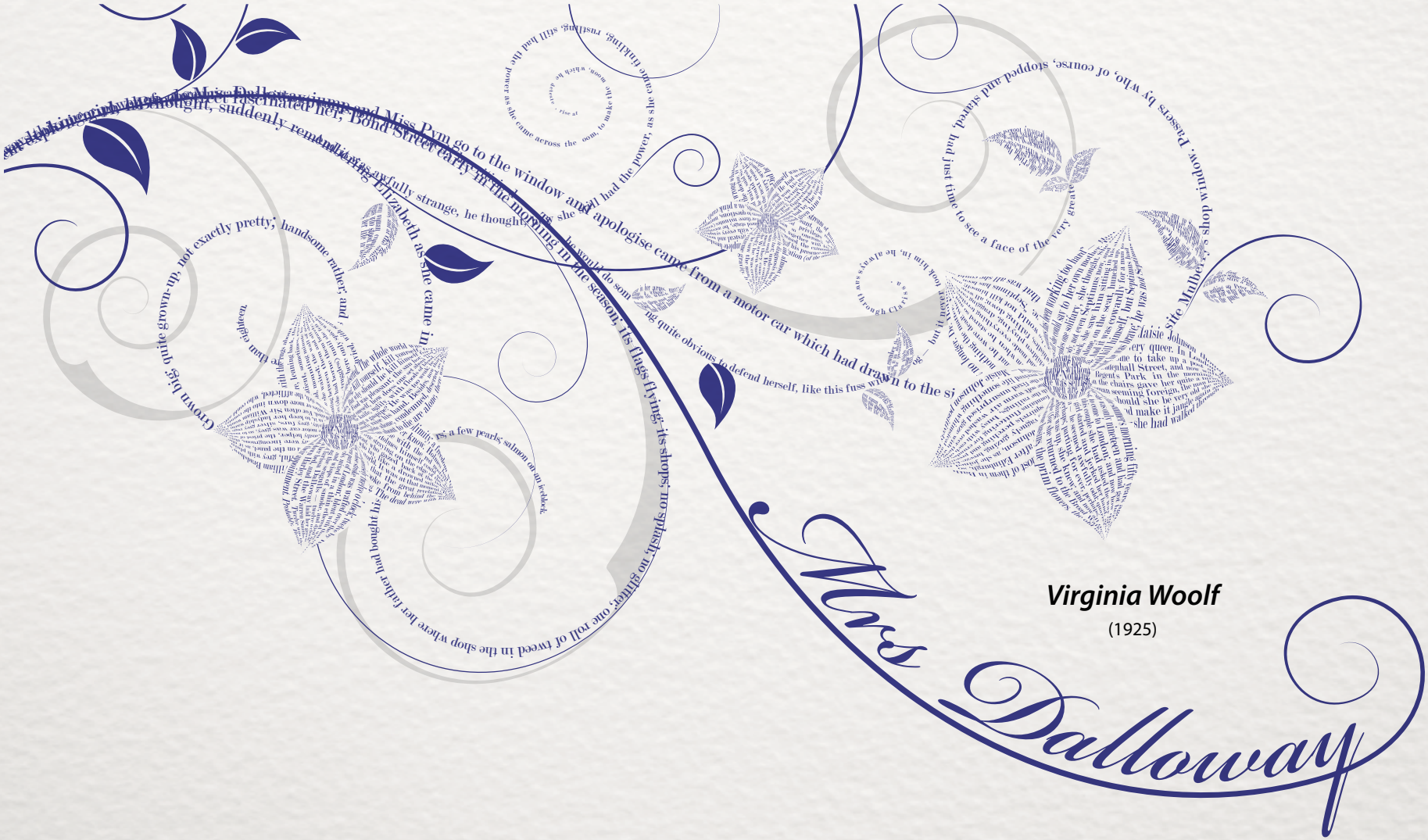
OCR
RECOGNISING ACHIEVEMENT

English Reading List



Virginia Woolf

(1925)

Introductions and Suggested Reading

These Introductions and Annotated reading lists are intended for teachers preparing to teach this text for the first time for Unit F661 in the OCR GCE AS Level in English Literature, though some materials may be shared directly with students. Most of the concerns highlighted address literary, biographical, historical or other contextual concerns, as indicated in the margin (AO4). Others point to critical approaches that may be juxtaposed with the candidate's own (AO3). Very occasionally some help is given exploring the text (AO2) though it is assumed that this work will be carried on in centres.

It is the intention that most of this material will be found directly relevant to AS study, teachers are reminded that Assessment Objectives do not directly establish the quality of an answer, but only assist to place it accurately within an assessment band. It follows that no marks are given directly for demonstration of AOs and that unless properly assimilated into the candidate's discussion, undigested lumps of contextual material may often inhibit rather than enhance an answer.

The brief suggestions for further reading will need to be filtered by teachers before they are presented to students; I would, however, recommend a general textbook on the novel, regardless of your choice of text. This is Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel* (Arnold), which first appeared in 1985, and has been frequently updated and reprinted. Hawthorn's sense of the history of the novel is astute, his use of examples informative and unthreatening. He is impatient of jargon, and his definition of key-terms ('realism', Modernism') is accessible. Here is a sample of his method. Here he tests the value of successful viewpoint choice:

I have tried to find good audio-book readings of all the novels, convinced that they aid student comprehension more than is generally realised. I also hope teachers will find my views of film versions helpful. No area of A-Level study has improved as much as performance-criticism, where film and television versions (in the case of novels) are viewed by candidates as critical readings of the base-text. Obviously this process will be short-circuited if candidates think of filmed novels merely as pale substitutes for reading, or, worse, as substitutes.

Please note that where editions of texts are suggested, these are only recommendations. OCR does not specify editions of texts to be used, and F661 is a closed text examination.

New Novel, New Age

AO4 Literary contexts

'In or about December, 1910, human character changed,' declared Virginia Woolf in her essay '*Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*', and her tongue was only just touching the inside of her cheek. The 'shock of the New' resounded in the years after World War One. 'We live in an age of experiment,' wrote Katherine Mansfield, '…when writers are seeking after new forms in which to express something more subtle, more complex, nearer the truth.' The same writer, whose work Woolf clearly envied, attacked the latter's 1919 novel *Night and Day*, written on the Jamesian model, as backward looking and conventional, overlong, failing to reflect on World War One, and generally 'tậhsŏme'. Woolf needed fresh impetus, and she experimented at first with the short story. These brief, sketch-like pieces will provide students with an excellent introduction to Woolf's mature technique as a novelist, and I recommend any study of *Mrs Dalloway* should begin with them. '*The Mark on the Wall*' (1917) seems at first to be a leisurely meditation on history dressed up as internal monologue. But everything changes in the final paragraphs when another character goes out to buy a newspaper, bringing with it news of ongoing World War One, and the 'mark on the wall', which has so far defied identification because the narrator can't be bothered to get up and examine it closely, turns out to be a snail. The story is a serious game about viewpoint, and provides excellent preparation for the many viewpoint shifts in *Mrs Dalloway*. A snail again features as the key to Woolf's second major story of this period, '*Kew Gardens*' (again 1917). If there is a viewpoint character in this story it is probably the snail, the only personage who has something to get on with (crossing a flowerbed), and who provides a focus for all the other events. Human voices drift past and are overheard, like dialogue from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: nostalgic lovers, shell-shocked veterans, 'She says, I says' cockneys, lovers exasperated with custom, or one aspect of it, before eventually the 'murmur' of the city with its 'vast nest of Chinese boxes of wrought steel' drown the human mutterings and the determined snail in a faintly ominous entropic ending. The Westminster flowerbeds and the threatening City both anticipate Septimus's London in *Mrs Dalloway*. A few years later Woolf wrote '*Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street*' (1922) and '*The Prime Minister*' (1922). Originally conceived as free-standing works of art, these soon 'branched' into the novel, *Mrs Dalloway*, and were partly incorporated within it.

Susan K. Dick, ed. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1985; revised and expanded 1989) is the standard edition of all the short stories listed above.

Suggestions for further reading

Peter Childs, *Modernism* (2nd ed. 2007).

An antidote might be provided by John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), an extended presentation of the charge that Modernism is essentially elitist. Very accessible, even for AS students,

Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (1996). This biography avoids critical discussion of the novels so as not to duplicate an earlier book (see below). Compact, despite the number of pages it contains. Highly recommended.

Virginia Woolf, '*Modern Fiction*' (1925) in the First Common Reader; '*Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*' (1923) in *The Captain's Deathbed and other Essays*. Both are included in the Oxford World's Classics *Selected Essays of Virginia Woolf* (2008). These are the key essays in which Woolf discusses her approach as a novelist.

E.M. Forster, '*The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf*' in Abinger Harvest (1936).

Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (1977). Excellent, compressed critical study, probably still the best. Accessible for AS students.

Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986). Tries to recover Woolf's work from the abstractions of Modernists, Feminists and the like.

Jane Goldman, ed. *The Icon Guide to Virginia Woolf* (1996). [Useful critical snippets, but fillet this for students.]

----------, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* (2006). Brief, compact, highly recommended author guide, though only a few pages on Dalloway.

Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (2000). An excellent shapshot of academic criticism of Woolf at the turn of the century; but a book for teachers, not students.

Suggestions for further reading

Living with One's Characters

In addition to trying out her characters in short-stories, Woolf also had the advantage of having introduced some of them to the public in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, published, after several draftings and redraftings, in 1912. Clarissa and Richard Dalloway, then about forty, appear in chapter 3 and are then pretty continually on the scene until they are finally withdrawn in Chapter 6. Most readers, coming to *The Voyage Out* after *Mrs Dalloway* are surprised to find such differences between the woman in the earlier novel and her older self in the more familiar book. For in *The Voyage Out* Clarissa is clingy, self-doubting, pretentious ('It's so like Whistler!'), snobby and whimsical, and says a great deal, some of it rather grating. This is the 'mere silly chatterbox' Peter Walsh remembers in a disgruntled moment. It is not, however, Clarissa who draws most attention to the Dalloways in *The Voyage Out*. That distinction belongs to her husband Richard. His politics, as in the later novel, are impeccably conservative; Peter Walsh thinks 'you could find them out by reading the Morning Post of a morning.' 'May I be in my grave,' he declares, 'before a woman has the right to vote in England.' But if his politics are straitlaced, not so his sexual ethics. In Chapter 5 he accosts Rachel Vinrace (the novel's rather pale heroine), delivering, according to Hermione Lee, 'the first and last graphically described heterosexual kiss in all Woolf's fiction.'

AO4
Literary context
AO2
Sources

Woolf and Sexuality

In '*A Sketch of the Past*' written when Woolf was nearly sixty, she explores her reticence about sexual issues, ascribing it to 'a streak of the Puritan', to shame or fear of her 'own body' and to child-abuse at the hands of her step-brother Gerald Duckworth. Whatever the reason, *Mrs Dalloway* is characteristically reticent on the subject of sex, offering just the faintest phallic hints about Peter Walsh's knife and then retreating into the poignant unsatisfied passage of childhood solitude and unwanted chastity: 'It was all over for her. The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow. She had gone up into the tower alone and left them blackberrying in the sun.' Clarissa's best chance of 'blackberrying in the sun' seems to be the kiss she shared with Sally Seton long ago at Bourton. This reflects the experimental lesbian relationships Woolf herself entered into at this time, but Clarissa's lesbian hankerings seem to remain firmly in the past. Septimus has lost interest in 'copulation' together with the rest of his 'feeling'. In contrast with *The Voyage Out Mrs Dalloway* seems comparatively bloodless in its handling of sexual matters, and much less explicit than Joyce's contemporary Modernist novel, *Ulysses*.

AO4 Biographical context

‘I Never Could Abide Clarissa Dalloway’

AO2 Expounding text

A privileged lady who spends her time fussing about flowers and making arrangements for a party–not a recipe for a sympathetic heroine. Building on her appearance in *The Voyage Out* Woolf conceived Clarissa as a satirical target: snobbish, ‘tinny’, ‘too stiff, too glittering and tinselly’ are some of the phrases attached to her in the novelist’s diary, where she is also condemned for her ‘frills, charms and affectations.’ She can’t think in philosophic abstractions (unlike the Bloomsburys), her education is sketchy (she still doesn’t know what the equator is) and she is given philistine prejudices (for instance, some of her judgements of Miss Kilman). ‘I want to bring in the despicableness of people like Ottoline Morrell [Lawrence’s hostess],’ wrote Woolf. ‘People scarcely care for one another.’

In practice, though, readers have taken to Clarissa Dalloway. She is probably the best known of Woolf’s characters, and the novel she dominates the most frequently read and fondly remembered of the Woolf canon. Far from presumptuous or complacent, as she had seemed in *The Voyage Out*, she is aware of her own fragility, and the precariousness of human experience. Clarissa ‘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.’ Brought up, like Woolf, on Huxley and Tyndall, she is a dedicated freethinker, thinking Anglicanism ‘hot, domineering, hypocritical.’ Despite the snobbery and ambition all around her (Hugh Whitbread’s, for instance) she is instinctively generous and far from judgemental: ‘She would not say of anyone in the world now that they were this or that.’ But what most charms Clarissa’s readers are her memories. In almost every scene in which she appears a swarm of past events, and past possible events, jostle with the present moment, not to replace or transcend it but to become absorbed in it, as one Wordsworthian ‘spot of time’ has power to modify another. Critics often relate *Mrs Dalloway,* with good reason, to the greatest of all modern novels about memory, Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* [In Search of Lost Time] (1913-27). At the end of the novel Clarissa is not viewed as an exhausted flaneur or ‘tinny’ hostess. She is a considerable woman, wearing her fifty-two years lightly, because she so creatively revisits the memories they contain. At the end of the book she fills Peter Walsh, and most of her readers, with ‘extraordinary excitement.’ ‘For there she was.’

Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown

'Many of the old chapter headings–life at college, marriage, career–are shown to be very arbitrary' wrote Virginia Woolf in '*The Art of Biography*'. She felt that novelists as well as biographers were too apt to lean on the 'old chapter headings' and said so, especially in her now famous essay '*Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*.' This is a brutal attack on the art of the Edwardian novelist and man-of-letters Arnold Bennett for putting sociological analysis ahead of characterisation. Quite unfair, of course (Bennett had previously attacked Woolf's fiction) and the student should read one of Bennett's great novels, such as *The Old Wives' Tale*, before acceding to Woolf's demolition of him. When Woolf and Bennett met, soon afterward, they found they got on. But the stakes were high at the time of High Modernism. 'Make it new!' was Ezra Pound's cry. And Bennett was suddenly old guard.

AO4 Literary context

Free Indirect Discourse

AO2 Woolf's fictional technique

In Bennett's novels the organising voice is usually the novelist's, who is therefore at liberty to suspend operations and insert essayettes on any subject that pleases him. Woolf wanted to bring a new impersonality to the novel, give the characters back their own voices, not hear them echoed through her own. Her solution was a continuously shifting viewpoint, so that the narrative moves from one experiencing centre to another, as it does in life. This technique is often wrongly called 'stream-of-consciousness', after the technique pioneered in and familiarised by Joyce's *Ulysses*. The phrase was coined by the great philosopher-theologian William James (Henry James's brother) and he meant it to apply to a smoother, more unsifted sequence of conscious thoughts than Woolf customarily offers. 'Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits...it is nothing jointed; it flows, ' wrote James. In Woolf consciousness is 'chopped up in bits' and then carefully articulated to provide edited highlights of a character's thinking or perception. Nor does Woolf tend to characterise by introducing idiolect or idiosyncratic turns of mind as Joyce does. Woolf's narrative tool is more flexible, more directed, but arguably less realistic than Joyce's. Most critics have decided to call it 'free indirect discourse', though some cling obstinately to the phrase 'stream-of-consciousness'. No character can see the whole fictional picture, but all contribute to it. The 'tunnel' of their whole lives, not just their present response, opens behind them, and is accessible to the novelist. As Woolf wrote in her Diary her 'discovery' was 'how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters; I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall interconnect and each comes to daylight at the present moment.' Woolf's cave has been compared to the parable of Plato's Cave, in that each character sees the inside of his or her own cave and not the whole picture. The triumph comes, however, when experiences 'come to daylight' and are shared, much as Septimus's sufferings are brought to Clarissa's party and transform it. What Woolf describes in her chain of 'beautiful caves' is what she describes using different metaphors in her influential essay '*Modern Fiction*' from the First Common Reader. Here she writes of what the novelist should do. He or she must record the transactions 'of an ordinary mind on an ordinary day' energised by a 'swarm of atoms and seconds', illuminating the cave-wall until we are aware of 'a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end..' It is partly because we know Clarissa Dalloway's present, past and inner life so intimately that she becomes such an attractive figure. As David Lodge has written in *The Approach to Fiction* (1992):

Undoubtedly this kind of novel generates sympathy for the characters whose inner selves are exposed to view, however vain, selfish or ignoble their thoughts may occasionally be; or, to put it another way, continuous immersion in the mind of a wholly unsympathetic character would be intolerable for writer and reader.

A Pocket Ulysses?

AO4 Literary context

Mrs Dalloway has often been compared with the most celebrated Modernist novel of all, *Ulysses*. Both are set at the heart of great cities, both frame their action with the passing of a single day, and both generate scope by burrowing into their characters' inner consciousness, especially by recovering their memories. Other Modernist fictions adopt this format, too: Katherine Mansfield's sequence '*At the Bay*' in *The Garden Party and Other Stories* (1923), for example, which offers twelve linked fictional sequences tracing events from dawn to dusk; and Woolf's own *The Waves*, with its framing device of a single day unfolding on the sea-shore. It is clear from the number of references to *Ulysses* in her diary for 1922, from verbal borrowings and parallel situations and from her discussion of Joyce's work in her 1925 essay '*Modern Fiction*' that Joyce's masterpiece was in her mind as she started work on *Mrs Dalloway*. Her book is much shorter than Joyce's, but locating it at the hub of Empire in 1923 makes global contacts, increasing its range: Aunt Helena's memories of Burma and Ceylon; Lady Bruton, organising emigrants for the Dominion of Canada; Septimus, defending Italy from the Austrians. This is the 'inner world of worlds which governs the world', ruling, or believing it rules, 'with indomitable justice barbarian hordes.'

A Great Realist Novel?

Modernist writers frequently argued that they didn't match their realist forebears (such as Arnold Bennett) in the provision of scene-setting detail, they exceeded them. Aware of accusations that her early novels distrusted reality and 'insubstantised' it, Woolf took great care to get the topography of central London right for *Mrs Dalloway*, and carefully charted Clarissa's journeys across it by means of a map. Critics have felt this a striking advance on the more impressionistic settings of Woolf's previous novel, *Jacob's Room*, giving *Mrs Dalloway* at least as much 'solidity of specification' as a Victorian novel. A good example is the sky-writing aeroplane in the early movements of the book, which winds between the experience of various characters. Clarissa seems to have seen it in the first pages of the novel, then Mrs Coates picks it up over the Mall, then Septimus and Rezia, a few minutes later, over Regent's Park. Clarissa seems to be seeing (but not identifying) the plane over the Mall again when she asks the maid what the crowd are looking at on her return home (John Sutherland suggests in *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* (1997) she must have taken a taxi to get back so fast). The plane has become a structural marker during what Woolf called in her notes 'aeroplane hour', allowing her, as Susan K. Dick points out, 'to present scenes which are happening simultaneously', and to do so quite unobtrusively. The debate as to what the plane is actually advertising ('Toffee', 'Kreemo', or, as the film has it, 'Kreemo Toffee') is perhaps best resolved by deciding it symbolises the relativity of viewpoint in this novel where viewpoint constantly shifts. We see and say what we see; but not everyone sees the same thing.

Susan K. Dick's essay *'Literary Realism in Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, Orlando and The Waves'* in the *Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (2000) is a splendid account of the pains Woolf took to get structural detail right in the novel. 'In terms of representational realism,' writes Dick, 'the first twenty pages of Mrs Dalloway seem to me the most complex that Woolf ever wrote.'

AO3
Opinions of other readers
AO2
Woolf's realist technique

A Shell Shocked Novel

AO4 Social and literary context

Winifred Holtby claimed that Woolf introduced World War One into almost everything she wrote 'as though its memory were the scar of an old wound she could not hide.' Certainly the War looms large in all her major work of the 1920s, often standing in for, or perhaps just symbolising, the personal losses which are the true genesis of her fiction. Her 1922 novel *Jacob's Room* is based on grief for her beloved brother Thoby, who died in 1906, but 'Jacob Flanders', whose absence represents Thoby's in the novel, becomes one of the 'millions of the mouthless dead' of the trenches. Woolf's greatest novel, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is steeped in memories of childhood holidays in Cornwall before the turn of the century; but the action is moved forward in time to straddle the Great War years. The conflict unfolds distantly behind the book's central section, '*Time Passes*', claiming the life of Andrew who is once again Thoby's representative. Woolf's third masterpiece of this period, Mrs Dalloway, is possibly the most daring of all her absorptions of the theme of trench warfare. The novel is set five years after the Armistice. Widows are pensioned. Legends are written round the bases of statues praising 'duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England.' The Unknown Warrior is tucked away in the Abbey. Memories decently fade. And yet for the shell-shock victim Septimus Warren Smith, the War has not yet ended. In a book preoccupied with memory Septimus's memories of his CO Evans's death on the Italian Front replay with the clarity and frequency of a moving picture show. Septimus's traumatised past overpowers the healing present, or, in the words of one of the trench poets, Edmund Blunden, 'the charred stub outspeaks the living tree.' For Septimus there are dug-outs under Regent's Park gardens, and dead Evans is more real to him than his plucky, needy wife Rezia. The high-handed institutionalisation of Septimus, the neglect of his pain, introduces a political dimension into a novel that might otherwise seem blasé: a procession of 'aproned white-capped maids' arranging flowers, punctuated with bursts of choice hostess-speak: 'It is angelic – it is delicious of you to have come.' Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) also uses a shell-shock victim to question society's neglect of and embarrassment at his plight. A young officer returning from the front has lost his memory. He believes he is back in his young manhood, when he fell in love with the daughter of the local pub landlord, so he walks out with her again, to the consternation of his wife, the whole village and his

regiment. Both West and Woolf insist that the 'hells war made' were still very much part of the present time, and may even provide commentary upon it. They are matters of corporate responsibility. Some of Septimus's thoughts derive from Woolf's own experience of mental illness: the sparrows singing in Greek in Regent's Park; or the novel's otherwise unexplained resentment of plutocrat 'mad-doctor', Sir William Bradshaw, whom Clarissa decides is 'obscurely evil.'

A Novel of Two Halves

Like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872-73), *Mrs Dalloway* is a novel comprised of two separate masses of inspiration that must ultimately come together. In *Middlemarch* this happens when Dorothea rises from a sleepless night to 'see and save Rosamund'; in *Mrs Dalloway* it is when 'Death', or more specifically Septimus's case-history, visits Clarissa's party. Woolf, after ensuring with deliberate care that the two main characters of her novel would never meet, got cold feet around publication time, worrying that 'the reviewers will say that [the novel] is disjointed because of the mad scenes not connecting with the Dalloway scenes.' Need she have worried? The book's weight is immeasurably enhanced if the social, historical and psychological issues Septimus embodies 'come to the party'. Sometimes when I read the novel they do, and the effect is cathartic. Sometimes they don't, and then I detect a whiff of contrivance, and the novel dwindles into an arty construct with slightly snobby social satire. But if Septimus passes his baton to Clarissa the book becomes far-reaching in its social implications, jabbing at an irresponsible and hypocritical governing caste, centred on Sir William Bradshaw, and reaching out to touch perhaps the Queen, the idle royal groupies in Whitehall and the Prime Minister's backfiring limousine. Woolf took a very deliberate risk with the structure of this novel, but she knew what she was doing. Septimus appears in the early short story '*The Prime Minister*' out of which Mrs Dalloway grew: he was not a late afterthought. She meant him, as she makes clear in an Introduction to a reissue of the book, to function as Clarissa's 'double'. And this wasn't the first time Woolf had built fiction on a determination to keep characters apart. Her earliest surviving synopsis features a hero and heroine who never meet. There are passages of antiphonal description. They draw closer to each other, eventually separated by a single unopened door. But the door never opens, and the young people are kept apart, much as Septimus never makes it to the party, except in spirit. He is Clarissa's double, but, West End society being rather select, not one of her guests.

AO3
Opinions of different readers on structure
AO2
Novelistic technique

The Hours

In her last novel, *Between the Acts*, Woolf brought out a favourite theme of hers: 'The extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation.' Some of that 'fuller investigation' had already been negotiated in *Mrs Dalloway*, a novel in which the lead character shuffles backwards and forwards between her teens and the present day, old friends grow young again, and the shattering experiences of five years back are replayed in Septimus's agonised death-leap. Meanwhile the hard male chimes of Big Ben and the gliding female response from St Margaret's, Westminster, always a few seconds late, mark clock-time, its arbitrariness, its limitations. The hammers sound, but very quickly (the book's refrain), 'the leaden circles' they emit 'dissolve in the air.' Even the numbering of the hours is not fixed. Thanks to the 'great revelation of Mr Willett's summer-time', Clarissa's party stays warm and bright long into the June evening. Time is not a prison-wall in *Mrs Dalloway*, but a basis for negotiation. So the characters live for the most part in mind time, doing the best to square their blooming memories with uninspiring appointment cards. Woolf's working-title for this time-obsessed, time-defying novel was *The Hours*.

AO2 Textual discussion

The Hours: The Novel

The Hours was the title Michael Cunningham chose for his 1998 Pulitzer Prize winning updated 'sequel' to Woolf's novel. Essentially it adds a third narrative to Woolf's two, and separates the three narratives into discrete strands, where Woolf's two depend upon their complex integral relationship. Cunningham's book begins with Woolf's suicide, and this section focuses on Leonard's difficulty in managing Virginia, and Virginia's mental sufferings during the composition of the novel. To this is added the experiences of one of Mrs Dalloway's readers, Laura Brown, in post-war consumerist America. Glum in her marriage, Clarissa's account of her kiss with Sally Seton in the novel strikes a Sapphic chord and Laura begins to experiment for herself in a similar way. The third segment of the book is most obviously a re-imagining of Woolf's novel: London's West End in the 20s to updated to modern Greenwich village in New York, Septimus's shell-shock transformed into the soul-searching of a gay poet dying of AIDS, Clarissa now an active lesbian aware of her 'scandalously privileged' status. The book is ingenious, informative, essentially postmodern where Woolf's novel is quintessentially Modernist. It is also arguably a bit bleak.

AO4
Literary context
AO3
Novelistic
reworking

Bloomsbury

AO4 Biographical context

Woolf's relationship to the rest of 'Bloomsbury' is likely to crop up in the course of AS study. The Bloomsburys were an apparently loose-knit but actually rather Masonic group of left-wing intellectuals who believed (among other things) in Socialist centralisation, moral seriousness, atheism and Modernity in the arts. One of their meeting-points between the wars was the Woolf home at 52 Tavistock Square, near the British Museum and at the heart of the part of London known as Bloomsbury. A blimpish headmaster in Alan Bennett's first play *Forty Years On* (1968) puts the case against:

> *'Highbrow layabouts, that's who they were. I have no time for them at all. The silly way of talking they had. How simply too extraordinary they used to say about the most humdrum occurrence. If you blew your nose it was exquisitely civilised. Darwins and Huxleys and Stephens and Stracheys, all living in one another's pockets and marrying each other.'*

It is easy to make fun of the Bloomsburys, and many have; but if you want to know them better British Library (itself in Bloomsbury) has issued a Spoken Word anthology called *The Bloomsbury Group*. This includes fascinating contributions from Leonard Woolf and the only surviving recording made by Virginia herself, a radio talk on '*Words*' from 1937 complete with fey accent and breathy, almost flirtatious delivery (this recording is also conveniently available online from the BBC News website, on Youtube or by entering 'Virginia Woolf's Voice' in your browser). Some of the old retainers who cleaned for the Bloomsburys and generally kept their lives in shape speak up on Disc 2.

Adaptations and Audiobooks

AO3
Adaptations as critical comment on novel

Though many Woolf novels have an understandable reputation for being unfilmable, the wacky *Orlando* worked fairly well for Sally Potter in 1992. But the best screen bet in the canon, with its tightly wound double armature plot and strong realist surface, is surely *Mrs Dalloway*. The Dutch director Marleen Gorris filmed this in 1997, with a screenplay by Eileen Atkins. The character's inner dramas unfold neatly, with scene by scene attentiveness to Woolf's structure. There was some muttering at the time, especially in feminist quarters, that the adaptation was a bit mellow and Merchant-Ivoryish. No doubt more passion might have been injected, but Vanessa Redgrave's hospitably bland performance suits a film with a fifty-two year old heroine, even if the younger selves are arguably rather bubbly, and don't match their older equivalents. Much of the acting is magisterial: Rupert Graves's class-bound Septimus, pursued by Amelia Bullmore's desolate Rezia; Michael Kitchen's Peter Walsh, all wonky charm; Oliver Ford Davies as Hugh, groaning with self-importance; and a let-it-all-hang-out cameo from Sarah Badel as the older Sally Seton. The film is nicely compact, too, running just 93 minutes.

Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* was given a major Hollywood treatment in 2002 (director, Stephen Daldry). Julianne Moore as Cunningham's ideal suburban consumer is superb, and Meryl Streep and Ed Harris handle the Septimus story with depth and humanity, but assessment of Nicole Kidman's admittedly Oscar-winning performance as Woolf has tended to focus on the strange prosthetic nose she wears. The screenplay, by David Hare, is excellent, but Philip Glass's music sounds like mental illness, as perhaps it was meant to.

An unabridged audiobook of *Mrs Dalloway*, read by Juliet Stevenson and running just over 7 hours, is available from Naxos Complete Classics (2010).