SEPTEMBER 30, 2020

Virginia Woolf in the River: The Intersection of Relativity and Modern Buddhism in *Mrs. Dalloway*

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Abstract

The early twentieth century ushered forth numerous scientific and philosophical theories that had a notable influence on art, literature, psychology, and philosophy. Discoveries such as Einstein's general theory of relativity, Schrodinger's wave particle theory, and Bohr's discovery of the atom inspired theologians, philosophers, and psychologists to focalize new concepts of self, identity, time, reality, and human experience. These shifts in contemporary human understanding developed in concurrence with increased global travel and intellectual exchange between Western and Eastern countries. As a result, writers, philosophers, and artists became especially interested in Buddhism among other Eastern philosophical and religious beliefs. Virginia Woolf, while being a self-proclaimed atheist, was deeply influenced by Eastern philosophy and well versed in contemporary scientific theories. Drawing on literary and biographical criticism of Virginia Woolf, I trace the intersections of Eastern religious beliefs and Western scientific theories through the stream of consciousness narration of *Mrs. Dalloway* by analyzing both what and how things are experienced by individual characters. In the novel, the integration of each character's stream of consciousness fabricates a dissonant medium in which singular moments in the present time are experienced through the minds of multiple characters, while they simultaneously navigate past spans of time within their individual narrative consciousness. Through the analysis of narrative form and narrative consciousness in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is possible to track the impact of Eastern philosophies and Western scientific theories in the novel's exploration of external and internal perceptions of reality.

Keywords

Modernism, Virginia Woolf, Buddhism, Relativity, Narrative, Consciousness

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf integrates each character's stream of consciousness so that readers experience singular moments in the present through the minds of multiple characters, who simultaneously navigate spans of time from the past within their individual narrative consciousness. Woolf's alteration of narrative perspective coincided with major scientific breakthroughs in quantum mechanics and quantum physics that induced shifts in visual, philosophical, and scientific perspectives represented in art and literature during the early twentieth century. In turn, modernist artists and writers began to experiment with nontraditional forms, themes, and perspectives; more specifically, Woolf and her contemporaries developed an interest in identity, discontinuity, consciousness, and the distortion of space/time. This interest was maturing in concurrence with the European colonization of Asia, which increased global travel and intellectual exchange between so-called Western and Eastern countries. Because many of the Western scientific discoveries were moderately compatible with traditional Buddhist beliefs concerning identity, consciousness, and perceived reality, Western theologians, psychologists, and philosophers began to engage with Eastern Buddhism. We can see these cross-cultural influences as psychological and philosophical theories of the 1920s began to engage with Buddhism, while Modern Buddhism¹ itself emerged in the west as "a critique of rationalization, secularization, and materialism, and projected spirituality and mysticism onto the East, pursuing the sacred through spiritual experiences as a form of self-expression and personal fulfilment" (Ditrich 7). The merging of Eastern philosophy and Western science is evident in Woolf's unique style of narration, where she integrates Western scientific discoveries represented in the narrative form with Modern Buddhist principles that occur within each character's narrative consciousness.

Virginia Woolf, who was a self-proclaimed atheist, had predominantly negative feelings towards Eastern religious principles and was hesitant to engage with them in her writing or personal life. However, despite her resistance, Eastern religion was saturating Woolf's academic and artistic social circles. Julie Kane suggests, "The extent to which eastern philosophy had permeated British consciousness in the years between the wars can be illustrated by the prevalence of belief in reincarnation. Three distinguished Cambridge philosophers—Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, J. M. McTaggart, and W. MacNeile Dixon—were writing and lecturing under the banner of the 'Cambridge Reincarnationists'" (332). Additionally, Dickinson and McTaggart were both part of the Bloomsbury Group, in which Woolf and her husband Leonard were active. Even Woolf's close family members were spending time in colonized Eastern countries. Dorothea Stephen (Woolf's cousin), for example, spent months lecturing in Bangalore and eventually published the book *Studies in Early Indian Thought* in 1918, exploring the influence of early Indian literature on modern Indian thought (Kane 331).

Independent of Woolf's own writing, we can understand how principles of Modern Buddhism informed her writing when we consider the general climate of cross-cultural currents where other modernist writers were engaging in the study of Eastern religions. Woolf's close friend T.S. Eliot, for example, took interest in ancient Indian philosophy during his time at Harvard, studying Sanskrit, Pali, and Patanjali's metaphysics between 1906 and 1914, with his poems such as *The Wasteland* and *Four Quartets* showing clear evidence of Eastern religious beliefs (Kane). Similarly, Woolf suggests the influence of Aldous Leonard Huxley and John Tyndall in *Mrs. Dalloway*, naming them as Clarissa's favorite childhood authors. The two modernist poets spent much of their life debating the consolidation of religion and science. At first, both were skeptical of religion, favoring the process and structure of science; however, as the colonization of Asia facilitated the exchange of religious beliefs

¹ Historically, Buddhism has been subject to extensive revisions and evolution due to its dissemination through various Asian regions. To simply say a concept is "Buddhist" lacks specificity, because within the religion, there are multiple schools, movements, and teachings that each have distinct interpretations of the doctrine. Of the historical events that induced development of the religion, the European colonization of Asia played an integral part in the formation of what is now considered "Modern Buddhism," which is the form of Buddhism that will be discussed in this essay.

that were compatible with Western scientific discoveries, Tyndall and Huxley began to combine Eastern religions, including Buddhism, with Western science to form unique ideologies about human experience. Milton Birnbaum states that, by the end of his life, Huxley had “turned to the east for further illumination, and died in the West trying to balance in an uneasy syncretism the Caliban of Western science with the Ariel of Buddhism” (180). Similarly, Ruth Barton proposes that “Tyndall combined a materialist interpretation of science with Carlylean natural supernaturalism to produce his particular pantheistic version of scientific naturalism, thereby sustaining, he believed, both the natural order and the moral order” (134). The integration of Eastern religious principles is evident throughout the Western academic and artistic communities of the early twentieth century, and Woolf, being an integral part of both communities, was undoubtedly influenced by the beliefs and ideologies of her peers, friends, colleagues, and family. Recognizing the prevalence of Modern Buddhism, specifically, in relation to Woolf’s communities, offers a new way to analyze her work as a reflection of global intellectual exchange. This essay demonstrates the vital influence of Modern Buddhist theory on Woolf’s authorial choices regarding narrative perception and consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Narrative Form and the Theory of Relativity

Along with the globalization and secularization of Eastern Buddhism, the early twentieth century was saturated with major scientific revelations such as Einstein’s theory of relativity, Bohr’s theory of the atom, and Schrodinger’s wave particle theory. Research in quantum mechanics was flourishing, and in “Relativity, Quantum Physics, and Consciousness in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*”, Paul Tolliver Brown suggests that “Woolf was certainly exposed to Einstein’s ideas through her relationship with Bertrand Russell and the prevalence of scientific discoveries in the popular media, and she makes direct references to Einstein in both her fiction and nonfiction” (39) and that it “is perhaps not surprising that she would have found his theory of a non-absolute spacetime continuum of particular interest to the development of her own writing style” (40). Einstein’s general theory of relativity suggests that the fabric of space and time are constantly being distorted by objects that contain mass; that time and space are subject to change, depending on the frame of reference. From this theory, a multitude of Western philosophical and psychological ideas were further popularized. Most importantly, a shifting concept of personal identity, developing from how we perceive and influence reality, became widely adopted by many modernist artists and writers who started to break with traditional Victorian values.

Woolf’s narrative form utilizes the theory of relativity to present how different characters perceive a subjective physical reality. She applies this principle through the use of multiple transitioning narratives, which create distinct frames of reference, as phenomena are perceived inwardly by each individual character. Conceptually, this idea can be further understood by looking at Cubist art created during the same time period. Akin to Woolf’s narrative form, Georges Braque’s *Bottle and Fishes* (Figure 1) illustrates how Cubism visualizes shapes and surfaces of still objects from different perspectives, creating a multifaceted experience of a physical space or object.

The flower shop sequence at the beginning of *Mrs. Dalloway* offers a great example of how Woolf’s narrative form functions within the text. During this scene, Woolf shifts between the consciousness of the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway, Septimus Smith (a World War I veteran suffering from shell shock), and his wife Lucrezia, who are all reacting to a loud noise coming from a passing car. In the shop, Clarissa is enjoying the sensory experience of the flowers and her liberation from “monstrous” feelings of confinement to her domestic role, “as if this beauty, this scent, this

colour and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when—oh! A pistol shot in the street outside!” (Woolf 13). The narrative then quickly transitions to the post-traumatic visions of Septimus, who imagines himself as an obstacle in the world that “had come to a standstill. The throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body . . . It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement for a purpose?” (Woolf 14-15). Finally, the moment is narrated from Lucrezia’s perspective, as she tries to deal with the suicidal ideations of her husband and the social stigma surrounding his illness, worried that “People must notice, people must see . . . they were people now, because Septimus had said, ‘I will kill myself; an awful thing to say. Suppose they had heard him? . . . Help, help! She wanted to cry out to the butcher’s boy and women” (Woolf 15-16). The violent noise, the street, and the people are no longer understood from the perspective of one person, but instead realized holistically through a narrative that uses alternating frames of reference. Because the perception of physical phenomena in *Mrs. Dalloway* is constantly in a state of transfer, the idea of existing in a singularly defined reality loses all foundation.

Narrative Consciousness and Modern Buddhist Philosophy

Woolf’s narrative form, following the theory of relativity, focuses on different characters’ perceptions of reality in response to events occurring within a specific space and moment in time; however, because consciousness is an internal experience, the author required a different way to navigate each character’s emotions, memories, or thoughts across periods of time. On this idea of perception, Tyndall suggests: “The brain is assuredly an assemblage of molecules, arranged according to physical laws. But if you ask me how out of this assemblage the phenomena of thought and consciousness spring, my answer is silence . . . The physical problem marks the limit of the understanding and beyond this we must substitute for it the power of Faith” (qtd. in Barton 129). Following Modern Buddhist principles, within the narrative consciousness, time is perceived as fluid, “dissolving not only as a metaphysical or conceptual category but also as a form of shorthand which distinguishes between past, present and future” (Gallois 432). Using this concept of time, Woolf navigates the narrative consciousness of each character, whose internal thoughts and observations of sound, physical space, and outer phenomena are realized internally without any temporal boundaries. This mode of perception projects external reality as a reflection of each character’s internal reaction to specific physical phenomena, in turn, creating complex connections between characters, their environments, and each other. As Clarissa’s childhood friend Peter Walsh walks down Victoria Street after their first meeting in years, feeling hollowed out from her refusal of his love, he hears the bell of St. Margaret as it:

glides into the recess of the heart and buries itself in ring after ring of sound . . . It is Clarissa herself, he thought, with a deep emotion and an extraordinary clear, yet puzzling recollection of her, as if this bell had come into the room years ago, where they sat at some moment of great intimacy, and had gone from one to the other and had left, like a bee with honey, laden with the moment. (Woolf 50)

Within the narrative consciousness, time moves freely, where the brackish currents of the past and present flow into each other. The sound of St. Margaret’s bell signals the present time of day within the plot and signifies a single phenomenon observed in the narrative form. However, as the moment transitions further into Peter’s narrative consciousness, the bell becomes a memory, an emotion, a person, and an experience that reflects his own reality experienced across time. Woolf’s manipulation of time in relation to observed physical phenomena establishes that an individual’s cognitive

processing of sensory information profoundly impacts temporal experiences—that the flow of time is perceived non-linearly and with variability depending on frame of reference.

A majority of the story is told from a narrative consciousness of different characters, where Woolf can explore the effects that identity, self, and no-self have on perception. Likewise, Modern Buddhist principles focus on an individual's self (atman), no-self (anatta), and consciousness, due to the belief that “inherent existence is merely a conceptual designation or imputation—it never has and never will exist” (Mansfield 62). A similar expression of existence as a state of mind is made during the dream sequence of Peter Walsh: “By conviction an atheist perhaps, he is taken by surprise with moments of extraordinary exaltation. Nothing exists outside us except a state of mind, he thinks” (Woolf 57). In Buddhism, the concept of the emptiness or void outside of the state of mind is referred to as Sunyata. This idea asserts that all things, including self, are empty; all phenomena experienced in life lack inherent identity because everything is mutually dependent and interrelated—never wholly self-sufficient (“Sunyata”). Just as void and light in themselves are empty, a perfect oneness, the self neither acts on, nor is acted upon, by outer phenomena because self and outer phenomena are of the same cloth. This concept is demonstrated by Clarissa at the gates of Regent's Park, where, in the midst of frustration about the state of her past relationship with Peter and her choosing not to marry him, Clarissa is suddenly struck with an introspection that pierces through her prior internal dialogue:

She knew nothing, no language, no history; she scarcely read a book now; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing, all this; the cabs passing, and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that . . . somehow, in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, and she was positive, of the trees at home . . . of people she had never met; being laid out like mist between the people she knew best. (Woolf 8-9)

In this instance, Clarissa's self is no longer restrained to her body. She acknowledges her emptiness as well as her spiritual closeness with the city, the earth, other people, herself, Peter, the trees; she exists as nothing and everything. Often, emptiness implies that for something to be empty it must contain nothing; however, it is important to understand that the Modern Buddhist concept of emptiness, which Clarissa experiences, is that all things, including the self, exist in oneness and therefore are empty. Thus, she is unable to state her true form, only certain that she exists as everything and everything exists as her.

To an even greater extent, Septimus demonstrates the Modern Buddhist concept of oneness, emptiness, and self/no-self through his narrative consciousness. In Regent's Park, he is transfixed by his senses, overwhelmed by the beauty of the elm trees rising and falling in the wind, forcing him to close his eyes:

he would see no more. But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres within his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement . . . Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion. (Woolf 22-23)

Septimus, while considered mentally ill from shell shock, arguably undergoes a form of enlightenment concerning oneness of the universe and the self, gaining the ability not only to perceive, but physically to feel the movement of space, time, and the interconnectivity of all things. Aside from the fact that he directly points to the birth of a new religion through the consolidation of self and physical phenomena, by drawing attention to the importance of spaces between sounds, Septimus's view of the world denotes the Buddhist word *Mu*. Often referred to as negative space, *Mu* is derived from the Old Chinese word “*Ma*”, meaning “not; nothing” (Schuessler 518). As an applied concept, *Mu* draws attention to emptiness and its influence on perceived phenomena. In “Intervals (Ma) in Space and

Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan,” Richard Pilgrim notes that Ma is the “blank space-time where nothing is done, and that ma is the core of the expression, where the true interest lies” (256). Although Septimus notes its importance, Peter delineates how Mu, as a concept, is physically visualized. Before reaching Clarissa’s party, he walked through London rain in the night, towards West-minster, observing the city:

It was not beauty pure and simple — Bedford Place leading into Russell Square. It was the straightness and emptiness of the course; the symmetry of a corridor; but it was also windows lit up, a piano, a gramophone sounding; a sense of pleasure-making hidden, emerging when, through the uncurtained window, the window left open, one saw parties sitting over tables, conversations between men and women, maids idly looking out, stockings in on top of ledges, a parrot, a few plants.” Absorbing, mysterious, of infinite richness, this life. (Woolf 163)

Only between window frames, in the emptiness of a corridor, can the endless possibilities of beauty form. Music, people, conversation, plants, stockings, all give meaning and intent to the space, however, for that space to be filled with richness and life, it must be empty to begin with. In Septimus’s observation, Mu is the rest in a song, in which the listener has a moment to hear the sounds that came before and what is to come after—a moment when sound is absent

so the listener may be present.

Through the lens of Modern Buddhism, Mu is associated with the fundamental belief that through the absence of self, the presence of wisdom and the holy may inhabit the mind. Where Peter and Clarissa briefly perceive, Septimus seems to endure in and as a space of absence, on an atomic level becoming deeply intertwined with his physical surroundings as they and he merge. As if he had been sewn back into the fabric of space and time while maintaining conscious thought, in Regents Park, he lay in the sun, his body “macarated until only the nerve fibres were left . . . very high, on the back of the world, spread like a veil upon a rock. The earth thrilled beneath him. Red flowers grew through his flesh; their stiff leaves rustled by his head” (Woolf 68). As a result of his mental illness, Septimus has broken the yoke, his mind and body spilling into the cosmic oneness that evades human nature.

The state in which Septimus exists is nearly identical to how post death is understood by Modern Buddhism—that upon dying, an entity returns to a collective oneness until they are reincarnated into the cycle known as Samsara, or reach Nirvana. However, it would seem that Septimus is enduring the sensation of death before he has physically died and on multiple occasions, he uses a body of water as metaphor to describe his existence as postmortem. Returning from Regent’s Park, Septimus lies in his chair, high on his rock, he begins thinking to himself: “I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still; he begged . . . feeling himself drawing to the shores of life” (Woolf 69). Nearly every religion links water to purity, rebirth, and death, as we can see through its frequent use in washing rituals, as symbol, or as metaphor. However, water is particularly important in Modern Buddhism because it is the space where everything is created; and everything returns. William E. Ward notes that “All birth, all coming into existence is in fact a being established in the Water” that “the universe is to be created from the cosmic waters” (136). Water, as a source of creation and as a place that life returns is mentioned by Peter during his observations of Regents Park. In the midst of listening to the love song of a homeless woman, he notes “The pavement was crowded with bustling middle-class people—vanished, like leaves, to be trodden under, to be soaked and steeped and made mould of by that eternal spring” (Woolf 82). The notion that living things grow, fall, and return to some body of water, a sea of oneness that is separate from the shores of life, is a Buddhist concept that is affirmed throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Woolf's metaphorical use of water as it is interpreted through Modern Buddhism further explains Septimus's state of existence, and why he describes himself sinking, falling beneath the thin surface of reality into oneness, into death. In keeping with Modern Buddhism's understanding of death, Septimus committing suicide is portrayed as a final attempt to communicate, to answer the question of human nature—how there is no death, no birth, and no self. He mentions, while waiting for Dr. Holmes to come into his room, that “He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did they want?” (Woolf 149). That being said, we can assume that his suicide was not performed out of the personal desire to end his life. Although it is perceived as an act of cowardice by many of the other characters, Septimus, Rezia, and Clarissa seem to understand that it was not. As Clarissa points out when learning of his suicide, “Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre, which, mystically evaded them” (Woolf 184). And Septimus, while trying to determine the method he will use for the suicide, declares that “It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him)” (Woolf 149). Deciding to throw his body through the glass of the Bloomsbury window, free from confinements of space and time, Septimus leaves the impression of liberation, but liberation from what?

To answer that, we have to look at arguably the only antagonist in the book, Dr. Holmes. I mentioned earlier that Septimus understands the world in a way that evades human nature, just outside of its grasp. Septimus describes Dr. Holmes, his local psychiatrist, as the repulsive brute force of human nature. Dr. Holmes is stereotypical of mental health care during the early twentieth century, only able to analyze mental illness as a treatable disease, like the flu and the common cold. Holmes is unable to honestly consider the world as it may be perceived by Septimus, for it is human nature to rationalize behavior and phenomena that we do not understand by labeling it as madness or insanity. Yet, it is this tendency that makes connection and communication with Septimus nearly impossible for the doctor. Dr. Holmes is the question that Septimus is attempting to answer, the physical embodiment of human nature that he wishes to be, and eventually is, liberated from.

In his final moments, just as Dr. Holmes walks through the door, Septimus yells vigorously “I will give it to you!” and proceeds to jump through the window and onto the garden rails below (Woolf 149). Because his suicide is an attempt to communicate his perception of reality, I take these words to mean he will give an answer—an answer to human nature and its inability to perceive phenomena that occur beneath the surface of human comprehension. Reflecting the global exchange and development of ideas between the West and the East, Woolf consolidates Modern Buddhist principles concerning self, emptiness, and oneness, with Einstein's Theory of Relativity as inspiration for the narrative form. Through this unification, *Mrs. Dalloway* is able to explore phenomena comprehensively without the restraints of human nature. The unique formation and representation of spacetime that formed through the merging of Western science and Eastern religion is akin to being pulled beneath the surface of understanding—to explore internal and external reality in all of its depth. Similarly, with her coat pockets full of stones, Woolf committed suicide by walking into the River Ouse, sinking to the place between, where all the possibilities of beauty form—it is from here, that *Mrs. Dalloway* is narrated.

I end with a piece of prose that I wrote while conducting research for this essay:

Following footsteps left in ink,

I walked through water, sweet plants, burnt sugar—through atoms, electrons, photons. Within a moment I existed as both wave and particle, the wholeness of a second swelling deep, reaching back into every corner of time. To the river that floods in the night; the scent of evening flowers unfolding the moon under the black cottonwood that rests its spring leaves against the east; a freshness that is wholly unknown.

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