Fading into the Background: the Disabling Effects of Ageing in Mrs. Dalloway

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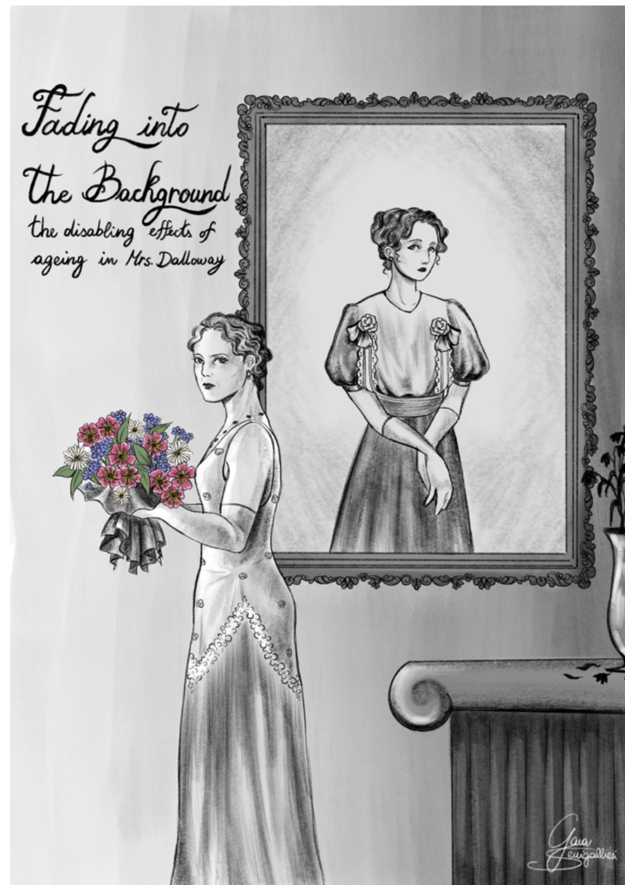
FADING INTO THE BACKGROUND

THE DISABLING EFFECTS OF AGEING IN *MRS. DALLOWAY*



MA Thesis: Literary Studies. Specialisation: Literature in Society. Europe and Beyond.

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Introduction

In a passage of the short story "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" (1923), the main character Clarissa Dalloway offers a vision of middle age:

> Middle age is the devil. People like Jack'll never know that, she thought; for he never once thought of death, never, they said, knew he was dying. And now can never mourn—how did it go?—a head grown grey... From the contagion of the world's slow stain... have drunk their cup a round or two before… From the contagion of the world's slow stain! She held herself upright. ("Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street" 4)

Woolf offers the reader a glimpse into Clarissa's mind as she reflects on the death of a dear friend and contemplates her own vision of middle age. Clarissa invokes Percy Shelley's *Adonais*, using the line "from the contagion of the world's slow stain" to evoke a sense of looming corruption and decay associated with later life. Clarissa, both in this story and in the later novel in which she is the titular heroine, spends a lot of time obsessing about the experience of time passing, ageing and death. In the shadow of the first World War, as well as in her own life—she is 51—these have become central issues. Generally speaking, it seems as though, in the first decades of the 20th century, societal perceptions of time and ageing was also in the process of changing.

The history of old age is complex and subject to many diverse characterisations. In *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (2004), Susannah R. Ottaway challenges the myth of a "golden age of aging", in which it has been argued by society that the elderly were once honoured by their communities, cherished and treated with utmost respect. She points out the inaccuracy of this theory, stating that:

> The problem with this fairy-tale scenario is not only that there was no golden age of aging in the European past, but also that the sentimental model that it proposes, a model in which the aged are simultaneously dependent and revered, is both condescending and misguided. For, despite the continuing preoccupation of historians with the issues of family and community care for the aged, the goal of older people themselves in early modern Europe was to preserve their independence until their last days, and to remain full and contributing members of their families and societies for as long as their health allowed. (Ottaway 1)

Therefore, the need for care is shadowed by a parallel desire for independence and continued relevance in later life. As Susannah Ottaway argues in *The Decline of Life*, elderly people in early modern Europe typically tended to prioritise and preserve their own agency above all else, challenging the romanticised idea of a past where the aged were uniformly revered and supported. However, this experience of ageing was neither static nor universal. In the 19th, particularly amongst the upper class, growing old could still carry a degree of social authority—at least in theory. As Pat Thane notes in “The Long History of Old Age”, folklore and moral tales often reminded the youth of their duties towards the elderly, as well as the old belief that younger generations fail to treat their elders with the same respect as their ancestors (Thane 195). Yet, as Keith Thomas points out in his article “Age and Authority in Early Modern England,” the so-called “gerontocratic ideal” was often contradicted by social reality: for example, ruling and military positions, between the 16th and 19th century, were assigned to men in their middle years (between fifty and sixty years of age), whilst judicial office positions were obtainable only above the age of forty five, but mostly assigned to men in their fifties and early sixties (Thomas 211).

By the early 20th century, the process of ageing—especially for women in upper-class circles like Clarissa Dalloway—had shifted significantly. As society underwent rapid transformation through industrialisation, urbanisation, and shifting gender norms, older individuals increasingly found themselves culturally out of step. This cultural shift is especially evident in Woolf's portrayal of Clarissa at age 51, who, despite her social standing, often feels irrelevant and detached from the vitality and politics of younger generations. As such, Woolf's novel reflects a moment when the meaning of old age, especially for women, was being redefined, not as a culmination of experience and influence but as a period marked by the marginalisation in an always-changing modern world.

One idea that contributed to this change, particularly within the artistic panorama of the 1920s, was that old age could bring, amongst other things, a creative decline in the life of artists and writers, which is promptly argued against by Gullette in her chapter "Creativity, Aging, Gender: A Study in their Intersections, 1910-1935" (19). This widespread misconception was shared by many notorious personalities of the time, and was enhanced by the fact that between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the portrayal of middle life decline was being pushed upon readers through novels that, despite offering a critical reading of the condition of both old and young age, still contributed to imagery that idealised the portrayal of youth (Wyatt-Brown and Rossen 27). What these narratives have in common is the way their authors portray youth as an alluring yet fleeting ideal, while associating ageing with a sense of loss, regret, or crisis.

Cultural gerontology is a relatively recent field that explores the social and cultural construction of age and ageing, rather than only considering its purely biological or medical frameworks. As Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin note in *The Routledge Handbook of Cultural*

Gerontology (2015), this discipline was born in response to the neglect of ageing within sociology and the humanities, aiming instead to challenge dominant stereotypes and develop interdisciplinary approaches to later life (2). This has led to the development of new frameworks within the humanities, spanning across literature, music, theatre, film and beyond, focusing on the cultural construction of age and aging. Scholars such as Margaret Gullette, Tom Cole, and Kathleen Woodward have contributed significantly to this field, particularly through literary and cultural analysis. My thesis builds on this trend by examining how *Mrs. Dalloway* represents ageing not as a neutral biological process but as a culturally and socially constructed experience, which for Clarissa intersects with gender to produce a form of social disablement specific to her time, class, and place.

A central concern that appears to be constant in Virginia Woolf's later novels is the way bodies are subject to change and decay throughout the years, affecting the manner in which individuals perceive themselves and the way one is perceived by society. Woolf scholar Teresa Fulker challenges previous critiques that presented Woolf as detached from all bodily concerns, affirming instead that physical influences such as illness and ageing deeply influenced her character's lives and narratives. She promotes the centrality of the body in Virginia Woolf's exploration of human experience and in the construction of identity in her literature (Fulker 5).

This thesis aims to explore how Virginia Woolf's portrayal of ageing and invisibility through Clarissa Dalloway in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* is used to critique patriarchal and ableist constructions of femininity in early 20th century England. In doing so, I will explore the ways in which *Mrs. Dalloway* finds a place within the socio-historical context of the time, zooming in on the role of women within the literary-gerontological discourse, and presenting Clarissa Dalloway both as an artist and as a middle-aged woman experiencing herself on the brink of social

exclusion. I will also look at Virginia Woolf's use of metaphors to offer a commentary on the physical and societal marginalisation of women in early contemporary England, thus laying bare a form of disabling that leads to societal exclusion.

I have decided to select *Mrs. Dalloway* as the main case study of my thesis because I believe Virginia Woolf is able to touch on the previously mentioned themes with remarkable care and incisiveness, whilst creating a well-rounded character that she clearly seems to be particularly attached to: Clarissa. Her first appearance, in fact, is in *The Voyage Out* (1915), then successively she becomes the protagonist of the short story "Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street". By the time Virginia Woolf wrote *Mrs. Dalloway,* her character was fully developed. As Wyatt-Brown explains, to truly understand a novel such as *Mrs. Dalloway,* it is necessary to take into account the impact that ageing has both on the life of the author and on the writing process, and that comes through in the way a writer and her characters speak. Moreover, Wyatt-Brown states:

> ... as literary critic Mikhail M. Bakhtin points out, the novel is notable for two elements: its "indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still living contemporary reality," and its ready absorption of multiple languages and voices (what he calls its "poly-glossia"). Aging is an important one of those "voices" in which writers and characters speak, and critics and readers must learn to hear its messages. To ignore that aspect of a writer's or character's life experience is to ignore a fundamental part of human nature. (1)

Virginia Woolf herself reflects on the discovery of her own writer voice at 40 in a diary entry of the 26th of July 1922, where she talks about her husband's thoughts on her novel *Jacob's Room.* Virginia Woolf comments that neither of them can predict how the novel will be welcomed by the public, however, she is aware that in her early middle years, she finally feels established as a

writer. She states that “There is no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice; & that interests me so that I feel like I can go ahead without praise” (Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* 186, vol 2). Age, in this case, is a component that contributed to Woolf’s confidence and comfortableness as a writer, and she notices how it reflects in her own work.

My research will engage with relevant scholarship in the fields of age studies and disability studies. I will argue alongside and reference leading scholars of this field such as Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, Jeannette King and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who have highlighted the historically marginalised role of age and disability up until recent years. There is room for more research within this expanding body of interdisciplinary studies that challenge outdated norms and explore the impact of stereotypical ideologies. For instance, Wyatt-Brown emphasises how literary representations of ageing are often shaped by narratives of “decline”. She states that our idea of ageing has become inextricably linked to decay and disillusionment, to which the only alternative is a romanticised illusion, citing Margaret Gullette to illustrate this point:

> One of the culprits, she suggests, is “realism’s typical plot of ‘systematic disillusionment,’” which has so influenced our thinking that we have come to accept this plot as truthful, despite our skeptical reading of most other literary conventions. (Wyatt-Brown and Rossen 2)

In effect, Gullette opposes decline narratives, which primarily understand ageing as a process of loss, to progress narratives, which stand in opposition to this attitude and instead subvert it. In order to do this, however, we must acknowledge the filtered lens through which we have been conditioned to view ageing. Furthermore, the field of literary gerontology is a field that

intertwines with many others and that allows us to gain a more complete understanding of ageing by looking not only at the later years of an individual's life, but by tracing the role of developmental psychology, not just in childhood, but throughout life. Ageing is presented, in accordance with other scholars, as something that we all have in common, as stated by Kathleen Woodward: "Aging is a subject in which we all have interests of our own. The difference of age is the one difference which we will ultimately all have in common, if we live long enough" (23). Therefore, exploring this field through new parameters that challenge old and ableist constructs, can be a beneficial way to lay the foundation for a shift from a decline-oriented understanding of ageing to a new, refreshing perspective that reveals other elements in these narratives.

To explore how Woolf's portrayal of ageing critiques patriarchal and ableist constructions of femininity, I have selected two of her most renowned works, "On Being Ill", which I will reference in chapter one in relation the ill body, and *"*A Room of One's Own"*,* which I will reference in chapter two throughout my analysis of Clarissa as an artist, *,* alongside *Mrs. Dalloway,* which will be my main case study. These texts have offered me insight into the author's mind, allowing me to get a sense of her view of old age and illness. Moreover, I have selected a body of secondary sources of leading scholars in the field of literary gerontology—many of whom I have already referred to within this introduction— with a particular focus on the connection between old age and gender norms, in order to contextualise Clarissa Dalloway's experience in early 20th century England. As I also want to expand on the intersection between age studies and disability studies, I have selected Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's book *Extraordinary Bodies* to support my argument and further contextualise the historical marginalisation of women within a patriarchal society. The connection between Virginia Woolf's language of disability and oppression has been highlighted by several scholars, most notably

Maren Tova Linett who, in her book *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (2017), discusses the predominance of negative representation of disability in both depictions of the human body and in the broader framework of Modernist literature. Once again, art, artists and the means of expression they employ are deeply connected to one another, thus offering a better understanding of the literary text.

Virginia Woolf has long been the subject of extensive critical study, particularly in relation to gender, modernism, narrative form, and subjectivity. Recent readings have significantly turned towards questions of age and physicality in her works. For instance, Teresa Fulker, as I will mention in the following chapters, highlights Woolf's attentiveness to the "daily drama of the body", arguing that bodily experiences are central to understanding her character's inner thoughts and lives. Similarly, scholar Jacob Littleton reframes *Mrs. Dalloway* as a "portrait of the artist as a middle-aged woman", drawing attention to Clarissa's artistic identity, social performance and ageing. This thesis builds on this scholarship, by examining how Virginia Woolf represents the process of ageing not only as a biological process but as a socially constructed condition, marked by gendered and ableist ideologies.

The first chapter of this thesis will present the field of gerontology, zooming in specifically on literary gerontology through the works of Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, and Jeannette King. This chapter will introduce themes such as the negative stereotypical view of old age associated to decline-narratives, as well as the recent attempts to move away from it through progress-narratives and consider a more interdisciplinary approach in the field. It will continue to focus on the female figure as well as her role in a late 19th century to early 20th century society, exploring the concept of the "invisible woman" presented by King and spanning to the field of disability studies through Thomson's work. After

offering an outline of a broader historical and social context, I will present the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, using Clarissa Dalloway as a main example to support my argument and further examine the condition as well as the societal expectations of women during that time, as well as Clarissa's relationship with her own changing body during the phase of middle age.

In chapter two, I will primarily focus on the novel itself and its central themes. I will present Clarissa Dalloway's character through the lens of Jacob Littleton's argument in "Mrs Dalloway: Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Woman", in which he explores how Clarissa's life fundamentally challenges the ideology of her social class by presenting her as an artist. I will then present a theme that is deeply rooted in the novel: the passage of time. In particular, Woolf utilises this theme in two distinct but interwoven ways, which are strongly noticeable in the narrative; the first one being a sense of impending doom that looms over Clarissa's life, and the second being the persistent presence of death as a subplot. These two elements are noticeable from the very first pages of the novel, as we learn that Clarissa has recently recovered from an unspecified illness, but that it still seems to affect her daily life—just like the passage of time itself seems to carry an air of inevitability and quiet menace. Finally, this theme is highlighted even more by Clarissa's constant reminiscences of her past. Through her memories, we are introduced to a younger, more carefree version of herself, allowing us to contrast her past with her present—one shaped by social expectations and the realities of ageing.

The third chapter will centre on the theme of age and its metaphors. *Mrs. Dalloway* is rich with ageing metaphors, which I will examine offering an insight into the way they have been employed in literature and in everyday life, underlying their often-negative connotation, in contrast to the strength and vitality typically associated with youth-based imagery. I will analyse two specific passages of the novel: the first being Clarissa's action of mending her evening dress,

which will be read through the lens of Gullette's concept of mending and repair as a form of resistance and narrative-construction; the second being a scene that follows Peter's perspective in Trafalgar Square, which illustrates the irony of a double-standard of ageing for men and women.

By examining *Mrs. Dalloway* through the various lenses of age studies and by offering a link to the field of disability studies, this thesis seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that has shaped recent discourse on the marginalisation of ageing women in literature. Through the analysis of Woolf's portrayal of Clarissa Dalloway, I aim to provide insight into how modernist literature grapples with ageing and the gendered social exclusion that comes from it, as well as how Woolf's work challenges– or at times reinforces– narratives of decline in relation to age. This thesis aims to illuminate how the intersection of ageing, gender and disability in *Mrs. Dalloway* and in the early 20th century can prompt readers to reconsider their own perception of age and all its social implications, deciding to adopt a more complex and inclusive understanding of later life.

Historical Framework for Narratives of Decline

Clarissa's struggle to find a place within society reflects a broader discourse surrounding the difficulty to retain a sense of belonging and meaning in years that underwent profound and radical changes, in every field. The historical context of 20th century England establishes a framework that allows us to understand Clarissa's character in a more nuanced way, as well as the relevance of central themes in Virginia Woolf's novel, such as the themes of illness and the body. This opens a discussion on the relevance of progress narratives to contribute to a broader understanding of the process of ageing, and to explore the even more specific case of female ageing, which often faces the risk of turning into a process that leads to a feeling of irrelevance and invisibility.

In *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa is said to have just recovered from an unspecified illness, yet its lingering effects continue to influence her everyday life and her vision of the world, like a dark cloud hanging over her head that she never seems able to leave behind. At fifty-one years old, Clarissa's condition is never explicitly identified, but many critics interpret it as a reflection of menopause– a reading with which I agree based on the strong textual and thematic clues of her sense of inadequacy within society, her reflection on the loss of youth and on the transition from being desirable to being invisible, as well as her fixation on how others perceive her, all themes that I will explore in this chapter. As the very opening line of the novel suggests, as well as Clarissa's constant preoccupation with her party throughout the day, the novel is presented almost as a quest for agency. Clarissa's determination to maintain a sense of control over the events of the day by coordinating her staff, taking care of the party's details, —such as the flowers and her own evening dress—and keeping track of her guests suggest an attempt to retain

importance in a social and private context. Similarly, on a larger scale, Clarissa finds herself adrift in a post-World War One world that feels no longer welcoming to her, both as a middle-aged person and as a woman. In particular, the link between women's role in the society of the time and disability studies becomes and important framework which contributes to create, in contrast, a nondisabled-male norm, leading to the understanding of femaleness and disability as inherent deficiencies.

Historical Context

> … on or about December 1910 human character changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; … All human relations have shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910. (Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 5-6)

This quote from Virginia Woolf's essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" reveals the social consequences of the shift that happened in the perception of culture and cultural norms around 1910. Woolf depicts it as a slow, subtle, yet evident change, one that subverts societal standards and has its repercussion within the more general spheres of religion, politics and the arts. In effect, these few, succinct lines highlight a broader feeling of total relativeness and alienation that permeated the start of the 20th century and that acted as a sort of *leitmotif* in every field, from psychology to science, from anthropology to philosophy and art. In art and literature, the

Avantgardes and the rise of Modernism marked a definite break between the two centuries, with a rejection of tradition in terms of values and techniques and a prioritisation of the individual experience as well as the emptiness of every previous model. In general, the turn of the 20th century saw a detachment from Victorian optimism, moving instead towards an understanding of the world that was much more sceptical and disenchanted.

Generally, it was the younger generation—those who were born at the end of the 19th or at the very beginning of the 20th century— that was mostly affected by the transition to a new paradigm and view of the world that characterised the new century. The lack of certainties and the spirit of relativity of the time deeply influenced younger artists, which could no longer accept the system of values of their predecessors, finding it obsolete and irrelevant, and at the same time struggled to find their own voice in a world that kept reshaping itself before their own eyes, molded by a chain-reaction of events that they could not control. In this context, the only possible answer was a complete break with the past and the experimentation encouraged by the awareness that, after discarding all old norms, everything was allowed.

This, however, contributed to creating a divide between past and the new generations; the rapidly growing activity of younger artists was encouraged by the disdain and frustration provoked by the new world they had inherited. This very abundant production became the reason behind the tendency to associate the concept of creativity and progress with younger artist, whilst linking rigidity and decline with tradition and old age. A primary example of this artistic trend and main exponent of Modernism was The Bloomsbury Set. This was a group of young British artists and intellectuals that adopted the Modernist's spirit of experimentation and progressive ideals to revolutionise cultural and artistic norms, rejecting Victorian conventions. Virginia

Woolf was amongst the members of the Bloomsbury Set, along with her sister, Vanessa Bell, pioneer of British abstract art.

Overall, tracing a rough outline of the historical context of the time helps us understand when and why the narrative of decline that associated old age to a lack of creativity and relevance began to take hold. As I have already explained in the introduction, it is hard to identify a specific timeframe during which this transition becomes more evident. Scholars have diverse opinions on this. While it is agreed that this change did, indeed, take place, scholars disagree on a specific year and understand the nature of change differently. Margaret Morganroth Gullette, a prominent voice in the field of age studies, adds a focus on women and women's creativeness in her considerations on the first couple of decades of the twentieth century:

> …we need to locate a period, the more recent and influential the better, when creative decline first began to be solidly glued to aging, and, more particularly, a period when the creativity of women could first be asserted and then (of course), in expectable backlash, be denied. I felt I had located age-correlated creative decline when I came upon indisputable signs of the monster's existence in the mind and, indeed, on the bodies of well-known writers themselves. For Anglo-American culture, these signs become decisively and unmistakably visible between 1910 and 1935. But it was still startling to find that a debate about late-life female creativity was joined in exactly the same period. ("Creativity, Aging, Gender" 20)

Gullette created the term "middle ageism" to indicate the discriminatory attitude towards middle-aged people. She talks about the role of decline discourse when themes such as sexuality or the ability to apply knowledge and reasoning to everyday life are explored within the context of the

middle years. In this chapter of *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993), she focuses on the intersection of ageing, gender and creativity, specifically in the time period between 1910 and 1935, challenging the dominant "decline narrative" of ageing by arguing that it does not properly reflect human experience. Seeing old age as something entirely negative and depressing and opposing it to creativity and young age was a dominant cultural idea of the time, however it is a generalisation that relies on stereotypes. My choice to focus on *Mrs. Dalloway* to show how the perception of middle and old age can be stereotyped and inaccurate aims to contribute to Gullette's stance on decline narratives, and such narratives' incomplete representation of middle and old age.

Gullette specifies that the signs of "age-correlated creative decline" became especially visible in the first decades of the 20th century, but it might be helpful to understand the reasons behind such manifestations in order to dive into the way older artists — especially female artists — were perceived in this time period. Gullette herself reflects on how these trends sparked from the "culturally constructed age depression" ("Creativity, Aging, Gender" 23) of early 20th century, following the discovery of hormones in the 1890s and the subsequent belief that, with the progression of age came a decline also in the production of sex hormones.[1] This led to metaphors of ageing and deterioration, encouraged by works of writers like Stanley Hall that identified sex glands as a primary source of vitality, thus concluding that this decline would bring also to a loss of vigour and well-being. Gullette carries on by saying that this "male climacteric" started to feel inevitable, and that:

[1] Gullette cites Leonard Williams (*Middle Life and Old Age,* 39), who described "premature age" as a "deficiency disease," reflecting the period's tendency to identify normal ageing as deficiency or illness. Gullette also references G. Stanley Hall (*Senescence,* 309), whose prestige as the creator of the concept of adolescence and promoter of Freudian sexuality added weight to his view that sex glands produce a "vital fluid" whose reduction with age causes a loss of vigour, well-being and life plenitude.

> Most important for mental workers, especially artists, the losses attributable to aging had become systemic—tied not merely to the sexual system but to cerebration as well. Even the weak denial "Genius is exempt" was not heard much. Indeed, once a decline in cerebral "energy" became a "known" correlate of aging, the original biological argument didn't need to appear; it was effaced. ("Creativity, Aging, Gender" 23)

To this we add the previously mentioned awareness that it was the voices of the youth that dominated the creative panorama of the new century, and we can easily explain the reason behind the complete lack of appeal that old age had to writers and intellectuals.

Another very interesting phenomenon that began to occur was the attempt of writers to resort to "rejuvenation operations". Throughout the years there have been some documented attempts, like the case presented by Gullette of William Butler Yeats:

> Yeats's operation most likely involved not transplantation but a partial vasectomy, an operation (associated with the name of Eugen Steinach) that supposedly stimulated the gonads to produce more internal secretion of testosterone. The operation did not specifically promise to produce increased sexual performance. Its promise was to rejuvenate the whole body, restore health, and—crucial point for our purposes—revive flagging mental energies. ("Creativity, Aging, Gender" 20)

And as for women's cases, Gullette writes:

> Doubts remained about whether an equivalent procedure could be invented that would "benefit" women. During that lapse in time, a certain amount of commiseration could be heard over the fact that "rejuvenation" was possible for men but not for women. ("Creativity, Aging, Gender" 21)

This shows how women were usually regarded as no more than an afterthought, excluded from dominant narratives, yet easily folded into those constructed for men whenever convenient. This attitude is particularly evident in the medical studies of the time, many of which claimed that women's mental states were governed by their metabolism and influenced by internal secretions — a dynamic not so different from that attributed to men. Leonard Williams specified that while menopause might bring physical ailments, it is upon the brain that its effects are most visible: “Then comes the hypertrophy of the Ego, written with a large capital, groundless fears, obstinate introspection, violent jealousies, sexual perversions, leading often enough to talk about suicide and profound melancholia” (149). Statements like this one only served to reinforce outdated and gendered notions of ageing as a time of psychological decline, particularly for women.

This marginalisation in the proper study of female bodies was upheld by the widespread assumption that all the best work in the artistic fields came from men, and in general, the voices of women in art were a minority. Even when women were considered, their own individual experiences were often explained through male-centric frameworks. In some cases, female experiences were used to offer a negative comparative element— for example, the concept of “male climacteric” or “man menopause”, suggesting a negative connotation of female menopause and using it to describe a perceived decline in men’s sexual and creative vitality. By understanding the context, we understand how society was dominated by patriarchal beliefs and how menopause was seen as something entirely negative, so much so that there is a term used to indicate a moment in the life of men when age-related changes happen, despite their inability to experience menopause in a biological sense.

Furthermore, a man’s attempt to preserve his youth and maintain his sexual drive is often perceived as “mischievous” yet ultimately understandable:

> This story, whenever I've heard it, is told with a smirk by men many years younger than Yeats was then, as if to mock the "old man" (he was sixty-nine) for inappropriate yearnings and at the same time fend off their own embarrassment at hinting at their own future desires. (Gullette, "Creativity, Aging, Gender" 20)

While on one hand this is the kind of attitude reserved for men's attempts at keeping the flame of sex drive and youth alive, we can easily imagine, on the other hand, how a woman that wanted to go through the same process would be seen in a negative light, perhaps even shamed for the association between rejuvenation operations and the restoration of sexual vitality. This is a tendency we can still notice in modern society, highlighting the different bias towards men that undergo aesthetic operations and women who do the same.

This gendered disparity shines a light on the patriarchal framing of ageing and sexuality. It is particularly relevant when examining *Mrs. Dalloway*, where themes of creativity, ageing, menopause, and introspection are pervasive, though not explicitly linked to menopause itself. We understand now the reason behind these strong narratives of decline, despite the fact that oftentimes, in the past and in other cultures, age is seen differently, as something revered and associated to wisdom. On the other hand, in the Western World, and especially in the beginning of the 20th century, age is shaped by societal views and scientific discoveries "manipulated" by societal norms. So clearly, a character like Clarissa – an upper-class woman in the beginning of the 20th century who is most likely going through menopause – feels out of place. The whole novel is a journey of introspection, aligning with modernist innovations, like the stream of consciousness, and echoing stereotypical beliefs about menopause, such as profound internalisation of thoughts and feelings, alongside depression, illness, even suicidal tendencies, all of which are reflected in Clarissa's character.

Narratives of Decline and Progress Narratives

Decline narratives and progress narratives are terms that have been widely used by Gullette. As the name suggests, a narrative of decline presents the idea of ageing as something mainly negative, associating it to ideas of loss and vulnerability. As opposed to that, Gullette writes: "'progress narrative' is also the capacious term I have been using for stories in which the implicit meanings of aging run from survival, resilience, recovery and development, all the way up to collective resistance to decline forces" (*Aged by Culture* 17).

After tracing a general context to better understand the scientific and historical reasons behind the slow yet constant affirmation of narratives of decline, it is worth examining why the shift toward narratives of progress has occurred so belatedly and with such resistance. This is relevant to the reading of *Mrs. Dalloway* as a progress narrative (ahead of its time) that offers a complete and deep perspective on middle years and later life through well-rounded characters and their inner thoughts. Additionally, zooming into the figure of women can give us a much more complete understanding of the biases embedded within patriarchal societies — particularly in Victorian England — have set when it comes to representation of middle age characters in literature and the expectation of adulthood in real life. Jeannette King highlights the irony of the tendency of late-nineteenth century writers to present caricatured-depictions of older women in their writings in a time that saw the growth of women's empowerment, with the fight of the suffragette movements and the increasing involvement of women in political and social matters. She writes:

> Readers of Victorian fiction will also be familiar with the caricatured images of older women which populate the novels of Charles Dickens … These caricatures were, however, merely endorsing the dominant medical and sociological discourses of the period, which laid the foundation for the ideological construction of older women as undesirable surplus, best relegated to the corners of the living room and the text. (King 3)

King points out how works of the time do not reflect the positive involvement of older women with social issues, focusing instead on stereotypical traits and narratives that did little to improve the way these figures were perceived in the eyes of the public. Of course, if we keep in mind the context of the Victorian era, we can easily understand why the idea of women fighting for rights – older and not – and being involved in social and political matters was frowned upon. The Victorian concept of "angel in the house" was the epitome of respectability for British society. Every attempt at distancing oneself from it was either shamed or bluntly ignored. Overall, the end of the 19th century did little to offer a positive image of old and middle age, both in relation male figures but also, and foremost, for women.

At the turn of the new century, little seemed to change. Themes of loss and crisis continued to dominate literary representations of middle age. As Gullette observes: "What is being constructed in all such novels is something unexpected, and at the end of the plot unexpectedly rapid, and absolutely irreversible—what would come to be called, many years later, a "midlife crisis," but without a resolution to follow" ("Creativity, Aging, Gender" 29). These crises often emerge abruptly within the narrative, causing characters to behave in ways that sharply contrast with their earlier selves. They are left with little to look forward to, facing an empty and uncertain future that destabilises even their core beliefs. As Gullette notes, it is precisely this lack of resolution that defines the crisis — its permanence, the impossibility to

recover from it. There is no conflict to overcome, because these characters are stuck at a point in their life where their only option is to go forward, towards the decline of old age, as opposed to the vigour of the youth. "The figure of youth" Gullette argues, "withdraws in all of these plots" ("Creativity, Aging, Gender" 30). This very same sense of loss and withdrawal related to youth is reflected very well in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in particular in the relationship between Clarissa and her daughter, Elizabeth. Clarissa and Elizabeth's bond has deteriorated with time, to the point that Clarissa feels completely disconnected from her daughter, despite her attempts at re-building the connection between them. Elizabeth is the only younger character of the novel, and she seems to keep herself at a distance from Clarissa throughout the whole narrative. Similarly, Clarissa reminisce about her past through continuous flashbacks, remembering a time long gone and inaccessible, lost in the realms of her mind.

The reason that makes it so hard for readers to accept a change in narrative and for writers to actually write anything other than the stereotypical shared ideas of decline narratives is discussed in Jeannette King's book *Discourses of Ageing*, where she also highlights the tendency of older writers – 19th century and before – to attribute all vigorous and positive qualities to their young protagonists, identifying, on the other hand, the villains of their stories with men and women much older, who oftentimes represent an old system of values no longer acceptable and in need to be defeated. She explains how the reader is forced to channel the vision of a young protagonist, no matter their age, and accept the fact that the older generation represents the unyielding, rigid values of the past.

Gullette makes a point to explain how progress narratives can be of primary importance in tackling this slanted bias towards younger protagonists in her book *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*:

> Such fictional events—and the rare progress narratives from the early twentieth century and before—revise the norm that we might call "pathetically or despicably aging." They can weaken the effects of the corrosive, powerful, negative ideology of aging we all grow up submerged in. To escape that ideology, one belief is necessary and sufficient: that life-affirming plots and thoughts can be given to midlife characters, because life energy can survive the encounter with adult vicissitudes. (*Safe at Last in the Middle Years* xii)

Readers are invited to root for the success of the protagonist and pick the side of a younger main character, as youth, we have said, tends to be associated with resilience, clarity and strength. Therefore, a victory is almost a given. It is evident then, how complex the passage from a young protagonist to an older one can be. The belief that midlife characters can be representative of plots that speak to all generations and that are captivating enough to maintain the attention—and the partiality—of the reader throughout the entire narrative was still marginal in the beginning of the new century. This, King argues, is one of the main reasons why this shift only happened so late in time, dating back to the second half of the 20th century. What is the prospective of victory for a figure into their middle years? King points out that this is a question that hasn't been much explored until recent times, and this uncertainty is reflected in Clarissa's character as she interrogates herself on very similar matters.

> But often now this body she wore … this body, with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children, now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them, up Bond Street, this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway. (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 8)

What is left for her, after marriage, motherhood, courtship– essentially, what is left for her after her youth? Clarissa's identity fades into nothingness as the elements that allowed her to fit the stereotypical concept of femininity, such as her ability to marry and bear children, slip away with the turning of the years. She disappears into the background, taking her place amongst the mass of Londoners, unknown faces with unknown names, as she feels that even that part of herself is no longer her own: her identity is strictly tied to her husband, to her role as a wife, to the point where her own first name is forgotten. The attempt to reclaim this identity is a slow process that takes up the entire narrative: Clarissa, in the beginning of the story, is lost amongst the crowd. It is no coincidence that the first scene described by Woolf is an ensemble, as opposed to the later scenes framed in more intimate settings. The word "invisible" is the one that stands out in this passage, and better sums up the condition of her character. I will explore this topic in the following paragraph.

The stereotypical role of women: invisibility in isolation and disability

On top of all the struggles associated with middle age that I have already mentioned, and the perspective of prolonged complications into the later stages of life, there is one more issue that women had to face, particularly during the 19th and 20th century, which is deeply linked to their societal purpose and personal agency. I have written about the main issue with middle age being the impossibility to properly visualise a future resolve of the crisis lived both by writers and their characters. Therefore, it is undeniable that old age represents the last port of call, and yet, there is still a substantial difference between the way it is experienced by men and women. Throughout the 19th century, the role of men was mainly associated with the public sphere, while women

remained rooted in the private. This very distinction was at the core of Victorian Society, contributing to the affirmation of the figure of the “angel in the house”. These women had the duty to manage the private sphere, while at the same time being able to raise a new generation that also had to fit into the Victorian ideals of respectability. The role of men was to receive a well-rounded education, have a job and provide stability to the rest of the family.

Although the early 20th century saw efforts to redefine women’s roles, the expectations surrounding them largely remained unchanged through its first decades. The stereotypical idea that a woman’s role culminated in marriage and in maternity was still very much present. Women tended to be trapped in societal expectations, with rare exceptions. *Mrs. Dalloway* highlights the contrast between Clarissa’s performative respectability and the very different spirit of characters such as Lady Bexborough, described as “slow and stately; rather large; interested in politics like a man; with a country house; very dignified, very sincere” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 8) or Selly Seton. Clarissa reminisces on her first meeting with Sally, confessing her inability to take her eyes off the young girl, for she had “a quality which, since she hadn’t got it herself, she always envied—a sort of abandonment, as if she could say anything, do anything; a quality much commoner in foreigners than in English women” (25). In contrast, Clarissa’s respect for high society’s rules, and in general, for the traditional traits of women of the time, leaves her wishing she could be something different instead:

> How much she wanted it—that people should look pleased as she came in, Clarissa thought … annoyed, because it was silly to have other reasons for doing things. Much rather would she have been one of those people like Richard who did things for themselves, whereas, she thought, waiting to cross, half the time she did things not

> simply, not for themselves; but to make people think this or that; … Oh if she could have had her life over again! (8)

Society's expectations of women and, in particular, its growing pressure marked by the passage of time is further analysed by Jeannette King, as she draws on Hilary Mantel's notion of the "invisible generation" — referring to women over fifty — to trace an evolution of the role of women in society through the years in her book *The Invisible Woman*. There, she explains how society's very idea of old age has always had a substantial influence on women, and on the way they are perceived. "According to such logic," she writes, "women's bodies inevitably become invisible, if not objects of disgust, when they no longer perform the reproductive functions for which they were designed" (King, xiii). This invisibility is also widely present in *Mrs. Dalloway,* as well as Clarissa's inability of being more than the role that society had set up for her: first, the role of the wife, and second, the role of the mother. After her marriage, and after the coming of age of her only daughter, Elizabeth, Clarissa's place in society begins to fade away, and the book is a testament to her attempt at fighting this slow, unavoidable fate, as she tries to organise her party whilst battling with the ghosts of her past.

In a biological and medical sense, menopause is the moment the body's reproductive functions cease. King dives into this topic as well, affirming that "most physicians were agreed that the 'climacteric' was a time of danger" and that "the medical view reinforces the ideological construction of femininity, according to which woman is designed and destined for motherhood" (9). This is, once again, a blunt indicator of the limited space reserved for women into society. Despite the fact that, just like for men, once they reach middle age there are still many years left ahead, the moment the capacity of having children is taken out of the equation, the role of women is essentially over. Society does not accommodate their needs; they do not have a say in

the public sphere – despite their vigorous fight at changing that – they do not have a career. Even if they attempt to have something of their own, like Clarissa and her parties, it is still something marginal, something that is somehow expected of them still. Likewise, Clarissa becomes the "perfect hostess", not so much by choice as by the expectations placed on a woman of her social class and age, a role that had been predicted during her youth and that she had attempted to reject, with little results:

> Clarissa came up, with her perfect manners, like a real hostess, and wanted to introduce him to someone—spoke as if they had never met before, which enraged him. Yet even then he admired her for it. He admired her courage; her social instinct; he admired her power of carrying things through. 'The perfect hostess', he said to her, whereupon she winced all over. But he meant her to feel it. He would have done anything to hurt her, after seeing her with Dalloway." (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 46)

In this passage, Woolf describes a moment where Clarissa's closeness to Richard Dalloway hurts Peter, to the point where he tries to hurt her back with his words. Woolf gives the reader more insight into Clarissa's discontent of the part she is meant to play. Peter's admiration is cold, sarcastic even, and his words are carefully selected to hurt. Apart from the hint to their complicated history, this is a very telling passage that adds to Clarissa's frustration towards a life she was not able to escape.

I believe that women's exclusion from the public life, as well as the tendency to define a norm of femininity and shame anything that distances itself from that idea has to do with the disabling attitude adopted by society in relation to the female body. Scholars have noticed parallels that have been drawn throughout the years between disabled bodies and female bodies. I believe that works of literature like *Mrs. Dalloway* bear witness to this subtle yet deeply

internalized association, even if it is not their explicit or primary focus. These narratives, in fact, attest to the legacy of centuries of exclusion and marginalisation of women and the continuous attempts at reducing them to a secondary priority the moment they deflect from the patriarchal concept of femininity. Rosemarie Garland Thomson traces this tendency all the way back to Ancient Greece, to Aristotle.

> Perhaps the founding association of femaleness with disability occurs in the fourth book of *Generation of Animals,* Aristotle's discourse of the normal and the abnormal, in which he redefines the Platonic contempt of antinomies so that bodily variety translates into hierarchies of the typical and the aberrant. (19)

She reflects on how Aristotle asserts that the first deviation in the life of a human is when a female is formed instead of a male. Garland-Thomson offers a very clear view of the link between disability and femaleness, lingering in particular on their condition as inferiors in everyday life.

> Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies. Both the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is amusement to possess natural physical superiority. Indeed, the discursive equation of femaleness with disability is common, sometimes to denigrate women and sometimes to defend them. (19)

This very exclusion is key in many of Virginia Woolf's works, amongst which her essay "On Being Ill". Her thoughts on illness—an unspecified illness, as generic as Clarissa's in *Mrs. Dalloway*—are that it can be incredibly isolating and that it can be only understood by those that have gone through it. This take surely reminds us of the concept of the "invisible woman",

invisible in the eyes of a society that does not share the same pains and struggles as the ill, and that, in normal conditions, fails to feel sympathy for them. When this happens, the isolated ill body begins to “shift”, and experiences a deviation from societal normative expectations, just like the disabled body. Woolf writes:

> In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn; irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up—to look, for example, at the sky. (“On Being Ill” 12)

We see here mostly negative connotations associated with the ill body, first and foremost its opposition with the “normal people”, those who are not sick and are depicted as soldiers that march to war. To them has been attributed an idea of strength, vitality and at the same time, the establishment of a societal norm. While the healthy men and women “march to war”, the sick are deserted and simply float, scattered with the dead leaves on the lawn. The concept of death and passivity is introduced to suggest that these subjects are completely disinterested in the life around them, because it is not theirs anymore, it does not accommodate them. Just like I have discussed in the beginning of this chapter, whoever experiences a deviation from a societal norm – whether that is the ill or the middle-aged man or the woman that no longer can perform her reproductive functions – has little to look forward to, and therefore struggles to overcome his crisis. However, Virginia Woolf concludes that for the first time in their life, these passive and lonely bodies are able to look at the sky, in almost a liberating manner, for they are outside the stream of life.

This final reflection resonates strongly with one of the central themes of *Mrs. Dalloway*: death and suicide. It raises the question of whether, sometimes, surrendering and withdrawing from a world that no longer accommodates us might, paradoxically, offer a form of liberation. This opposition is embodied in the two characters of Clarissa and Septimus. The two never interact directly throughout the entire novel, however their stories overlap momentarily towards the conclusion of the book, when Clarissa escapes her own party to reflect on the news of Septimus Smith's death and catches a glimpse of another woman, much older than her, standing alone in her room, in a house across the street. Clarissa watches her with significant attention, until the woman draws the curtain and disappears in the darkness of the night. Clarissa is unable to move on or step away from the window or get out of her mind. How does one grow old in the new century? What role will she have—will she even have one? In a time of changes and uncertainties, after a World War which has shaken the very foundation of the "old world", her generation is the first one to experience middle age not knowing what to expect. The old generation doesn't worry about it, because they already went through it. The new is left there, stood by a window in a world that makes less and less sense, represented by the parties and the meaningless conversations, but that nonetheless has changed. One cannot go on pretending like it hasn't. This is the very reason why the death of Septimus strikes Clarissa so much. "Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought" is a metaphor to say that change will not be ignored, even if everyone tries to turn a blind eye to it. This realisation that something is looming over all of them, not only over a generation that is entering an older stage in life, but also over a whole social class that stays attached to the past, while the rest of the world is moving on.

The Artist and the Drama of the Body

Woolf scholar Jacob Littleton argues that Clarissa Dalloway's unique perspective on life can be compared to that of an artist (36). Her art form is not paintings or writings, rather, her artworks are the dashing and meticulously thought-through parties that she organises; this artistry, Littleton argues, "is the essential key to understanding her character, and the depiction of that character is the novel's key event" (36). I believe this to be an interesting way to read Clarissa's character not only in the light of the novel, but even more so in light of the social and historical context mentioned in the previous chapter, which makes *Mrs. Dalloway* more than a simple piece of fiction, but a revealing reflection on the life of middle-aged women in early 20th century England.

Just like any artist, Clarissa has a specific intent when it comes to the reasons that move her to organise her parties.

> And she felt quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she felt what a waste; and she felt what a pity; and she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? An offering for the sake of offering, perhaps. (89)

Clarissa creative process starts with the observation of the world around her: "Here was So-and-So in South Kensington; someone up in Bayswater; and somebody else, say, in Mayfair" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 89). All these individuals, each of them living their own solitary life, apart from one another, are what inspire Clarissa to act. It is this very distance and loneliness, this very isolation that she considers a waste. And she decides to bring them together, her parties becoming a mean of creation and celebration of life.

As Littleton states, "artists, as knowing manipulators and expressors of consciousness, replaced priests and monarchs as actual creators of order and meaning" (42). To expand on this, it would be useful to draw from what I discussed in the previous chapters on the concept of creation which used to be associated to youth, as opposed to the state of passiveness typical of old age. Clarissa's intent from the very opening sentence of the novel, "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (1) is an assertion of autonomy, a declaration of agency, which is subtly carried out throughout the entire book. Clarissa is a middle-aged woman who places herself in an active role of creation. Therefore, there is an omnipresent need to maintain this role, despite it being associated with youth.

In this chapter, I will explore the relation between Clarissa and her role as an artist, focusing in particular on the role that the audience plays on way external influences can distort the meaning of artworks. I will then dive into the themes of death and the passage of time to better understand Clarissa's character and her progression throughout the novel, as well as revealing the true meaning of her parties. Finally, I will highlight the connection between Clarissa and the "ill body", expanding on another main theme of the novel, that of isolation in relation to the middle years.

The Artwork Deformed by the World

In *Bodies of Modernism,* Maren Trova Linett explores the way disability and deformity were used as metaphors and themes in Modernist literature. She expands on Virginia Woolf's writings, particularly *A Room of One's Own,* to explore the relationship between outside

pressures and an artist's artwork. In particular, she highlights the repetition of certain words associated to the concepts of deformity and disability, pointing out:

> The word *cramped* highlights the connection between this image of deformity and the main focus of the essay: the relation between writing and material reality. … Woolf seems to be envisioning, then, a physical pressure that pulls the web "askew," that "deforms" and "twists" the text and "cramps" and "thwarts" the body of the author. Her emphasis on bodily and material circumstances makes possible this conflation of a "cramped and thwarted" soul with physical deformity. … Throughout *Room*, Woolf describes artworks as having bodies that can be deformed, twisted, and contracted with spasms. (Linett 166-167)

If we consider Clarissa's parties as her works of art, then we can see how this analysis appears to be true for this specific case as well. The notion that works of art are subject to the interpretation of the audience and thus undergo a process of "deformity" comports a deviation in meaning from the artist's original intention behind their work. Throughout the novel, in fact, Clarissa's dedication to her parties is something that is not fully understood by any of the other characters. She feels particularly frustrated with both Peter and Richard when she realises that neither of them can see the true meaning behind her actions. She ruminates on Peter's questions about the sense of her parties, and how she had provided an answer that she already knew would not be fully understood. For the first time in the novel, Clarissa speaks of her parties as "an offering", repeating it shortly after, and continues to reflect on the unjust criticism received by both men:

> Her parties! Both of them criticised her very unfairly, laughed at her very unjustly, for her parties. That was it! That was it! Well, how was she going to defend herself? Now that she knew what it was, she felt perfectly happy. They thought, or Peter at any rate thought, that she enjoyed imposing herself; liked to have famous people about her, great names; was simply a snob in short. Well, Peter might think so. Richard merely thought it was foolish of her to like the excitement when she knew it was bad for her heart. It was childish, he thought. And both were quite wrong. What she liked was simply life. (89)

Artist-Clarissa falls victim of the same oppression that artists must face when the world perceives their art, and in addition to that, because of her identity as a woman, she falls victim to an even more specific, gendered and oppressive type of interpretation of her work. An interpretation is, after all, a distortion of the creator's primary intentions, an imposition of the audience's own voice over that which has been breathed in the artwork itself. This links back to the notion explained by Linett of artworks thought as bodies that can be "deformed" and "twisted". Moreover, Clarissa is a woman, which adds a new layer of frustration to the action of two male characters misinterpreting her intentions. Peter, for example, cannot find meaning behind these parties, not one that would explain why the Clarissa he knows would care so deeply for them. At one point of the novel, he reflects on her role as a wife, and concludes that married life caused her to become an extension of Richard Dalloway, causing her to care for matters as trivial as evening parties:

> With twice his wits, she had to see things through his eyes—one of the tragedies of married life. With a mind of her won, she must always be quoting Richard—as if one couldn't know to a tittle what Richard thought by reading the *Morning Post* of a morning! These parties, for example, were all for him, or for her idea of him. (57)

It becomes now evident how little Clarissa's voice is taken into account, when one considers her position within the English society of the time: Clarissa is a woman, and as such, the possibilities that grant her agency in life are limited. She has reached middle age, meaning that most of the qualities that defined her as a woman in early 20th century England—her youth, the possibility to bear children—have already faded. And above all, she is an artist who faces the struggle to create and express her voice in a world where the only voices worth listening were those of the youth, and particularly those of men.

Evidently, her intentions will be downplayed as "childish" and "snobbish", her voice, along with her artwork have been deformed by a primarily patriarchal society, which is one of the main points that Virginia Woolf touches on in her essay "A Room of One's Own"*:*

> … but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that [Jane Austen] will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. How could she help but die young, cramped and thwarted? ("A Room of One's Own" 104)

And just as Woolf writes about Jane Austen's tragic fate, about how her genius will never be expressed "whole and entire", how her voice will never be truly heard but she is instead destined to die "cramped and thwarted", Clarissa's final thoughts on this matter are turned to death, too, and to the awareness that her condition won't change: "After that, how unbelievable death was!—that is must end; and no one in the whole world would know how she had loved it all; how, every instant…" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 89). Clarissa's love for life is the core of her being, the true meaning of her parties, but her resignation to the awareness that no one will ever

know the true extent of this love shows how she is fading into the background of her own story. She is aware of the passage of time and of the fact that death will put an end to her efforts to be known and understood. At this point of the novel, she is completely in the shadow: her identity does not belong to her, her intentions and her parties are misinterpreted, and her youth is slowly slipping away, carrying within everything that constituted her identity as a young woman.

Clarissa and the Ill Body

In the previous chapter I have used a passage of Virginia Woolf's essay "On Being Ill" to introduce the theme of the unique perspective that ill bodies have of the world. This stance is—in Woolf's opinion—the only consolation in a life of utter isolation, both on the literal and metaphorical point of view.

In reading *Mrs. Dalloway,* I have found that isolation can take these two different shapes, both of them being particularly characteristic of Clarissa's life. Metaphorical isolation comes when others cannot understand the condition of the ill body, for they do not share the same pains and sorrows that seize an ill man or a woman. Literal isolation is something that is strictly linked to the physical plane, which I believe it is a direct consequence of the lack of empathy that comes with metaphorical isolation. As such, the "other"—the ill body whom all the rest cannot truly empathise with—undergoes a process of exclusion both within the private and public context. As a premise, I would like to point out a clarification on the use of the terms associated to "disability" and "ill bodies" in relation to female bodies. As we have established, women were, essentially, excluded from aspects of public life on the basis of biased societal norms,

placing them in the same condition of disabled bodies, who must navigate a world that does not accommodate them.

In Clarissa's case, there is more than one reason that makes her fit within the category of the "ill bodies". As I have already explained in chapter one, it was not uncommon, throughout history, to associate the female body to the notions of "deformity" and "disability". Linett talks about this in her chapter *Deformity and Modernist Form* as she draws from Virginia Woolf's use of disability imagery to subtly offer a critique to the bluntly bias that permeated the patriarchal society of her time. In short, many of Woolf's writings that make use of this imagery critique the way in which perfectly capable, smart and erudite women were still considered inferior to men, despite matching—if not surpassing them—in wits.[2]. Linett adds to this tendency contextualising it through the examination of some early 20th century vignettes that commented on the suffragette movement, stating that "The frequency of this visual rhetoric demonstrates its success at showing that women are fit to vote: compared to the varieties of men accepted as unfit, they are clearly deserving of the franchise" (172). In these cases, the strategy employed was the use of the sematic field of disability in a way that contrasted with its typical association to women.

Being a woman is, per se, the first reason that applies to Clarissa that places her in the category of disabled bodies, which, like the ill, are not seen nor fully understood. Clarissa has also just recovered from influenza – whether this is intended to be only that or a metaphor for menopause, it makes little difference, for Clarissa would be in the age range of menopause regardless. We learn that this is the reason behind her choice to sleep in a separate room than her

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[2] In her essay "A Room of One's Own", Virginia Woolf talks about Oscar Browning – a British historian and educationalist – depicting him as a proper representation of the mysogenistic beliefs of the patriarchal society of the time. Woolf writes: "[Oscar Browning] was wont to declare that […] irrespective of the marks that he might give, the best woman was intellectually inferior of the worst man."

husband, in the attic, in a single bed. Here comes the first example of her isolation, in the literal sense, from the rest of the family:

> 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. The door had shut, and there among the dust of fallen plaster and the litter of birds' nests how distant the view had looked, and the sounds came thin and chill (once on Leith Hill, she remembered), and Richard, Richard! she cried, as a sleeper in the night starts and stretches a hand in the dark for help. Lunching with Lady Bruton, it came back to her. He has left me; I am alone for ever, she thought, folding her hands upon her knee. (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 34)

Clarissa sees her condition of isolation as a point of no return. She has isolated herself not only from people, but from life, which manifests itself in the distant views and sounds that come "thin and chill" in her single room, up in the attic. The chillness that she speaks of can be further associated with the idea of old age and death, as opposed to the image of the warmth of the sun, to which the rest can still be exposed to and bask into. I believe it is interesting to notice that the season to pick blackberries is the end of summer and beginning of autumn, which could be interpreted like a metaphor for the transition into middle age, before the arrival of winter—to which, as we mentioned, is associated old age. Thus, Clarissa feels alone in facing the next stage of her life, which presents itself to her as cold and dark, while the rest of her friends are facing this change together, as suggested in the line: "She had gone up into the tower alone and left them blackberrying in the sun". She feels excluded, denoting a specific space for herself, her bedroom, away from everyone else.

Lady Bruton's lunch is another prominent instance where Clarissa's absence is representative of her exclusion due to her supposed illness. Throughout the lunch with Richard and other members of high society and their wives, Lady Bruton takes the time to ask Mr. Dalloway about Clarissa's condition. This, however, is presented as a subtle example of hostility from Lady Bruton, who does not seem to empathise at all with her situation:

> Thus, when she said in her offhand way 'How's Clarissa?' husbands had difficulty in persuading their wives and indeed, however devoted, were secretly doubtful themselves, of her interest in women who often got in their husbands' way, prevented them from accepting posts abroad, and had to be taken to the seaside in the middle of the session to recover from influenza. (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 79)

A wife that gets in the husband's way is all that the women present at the lunch seem to see Clarissa as. It is the displeased subtext of Lady Bruton's question. And once again, it highlights a kind of isolation that is both literal—for Clarissa had not been invited at the party, therefore she is not present to a conversation of which she is the subject of—and metaphorical, because no one is able to empathise with her. Clarissa views her exclusion as a consequence of her irrelevance, now that she has entered a new stage in her life that takes away everything that made her young and relevant. Upon receiving the news of Richard's invite, in fact, Clarissa walks to her room—a moment in which she describes herself as "alone, a single figure against the appalling night, or rather, to be accurate, against the stare of this matter-of-fact June morning" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 23)—and reflects on her condition:

> She began to go slowly upstairs, with her hand on the banisters, as if she had left a party, where now this friend now that had flashed back her face, her voice; … She knew, and she felt it, as she paused by the open staircase window which let in blinds flapping, dogs

> barking, let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain, which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her. (23)

In her scholarly article 'Virginia Woolf's daily Drama of the Body', Teresa Fulker explores the way Virginia Woolf engages with the "bodily" in *Mrs. Dalloway* and other writings. She challenges the perception endorsed by some critics that Woolf's writings focus solely on consciousness or the "spiritual", neglecting instead the physical. Fulker argues that despite Virginia Woolf's discomfort with certain bodily representations, she still shows a deep understanding of how the physical self plays a crucial role into shaping one's inner life and identity. I believe Fulker best explains the process behind this progression of thoughts when she states that "Mrs. Dalloway in fact inscribes one version of Woolf's "daily drama of the body"; the novel involves a deep appreciation of how the corporeal affects all aspects of life, of how the inner life is shaped by that entity which is not precisely inner, nor precisely outer—one's material self" (Fulker 9). Woolf, in fact, uses in the previously quoted passage a series of adjectives to refer to Clarissa's ageing body that have completely negative connotations and highlights Clarissa's condition of failure, which comes as a consequence of her loss of youth. She becomes aware, all of a sudden, of her age, which resides especially is what she lacks: she feels "breastless", as she is past the age of fertility, and lacks the "flowering of the day", which only happens outside of her. Fulker comments on this scene, affirming that:

> What is clear is that the narrator is comparing the sense of plenitude Clarissa has about her body at a party, when that body is mirrored back to her by her friends, with the negation of her body imposed by "the appalling night, or rather... the stare of this matter-

> of-fact June morning," both of which somehow refuse to reflect, and therefore refuse to allow, her humanity; feeling refused, denied, erased by Lady Bruton's neglect of her, Clarissa faces, through the open window, the beautiful but inhuman spring day, and feels doubly erased. (16)

I find the key passage in this comment to be the concept of the refusal of Clarissa's humanity. In this statement is held the core idea of the parallel between the ill body, the ageing body and the disabled body. In this exclusion operated by society lies the drama of erasure and of death. Clarissa feels "out of her body and brain", a sentence which suggests a sense of alienation not only from her material self (the body that Clarissa only feels as her own when it has a purpose, like filling her position amongst the crowd of a party), but also from a more abstract, conceptual side of her. Her identity slips away from her, and this is where the feeling of "refusal" and "erasure" comes in. The "death of the soul", a phrase that Peter repeats multiple times in the novel after his brief visit to Clarissa, best describes this dual loss of physical self and identity. It is a kind of death that does not plague Clarissa alone, but that also hangs over the passing hours of the day and that concludes the novel, with the news of Septimus Smith's suicide. Septimus is, in fact, another representative of this erasure that Fulker speaks of: a war veteran, suffering from PTSD, whom nobody seems to be able to properly empathise with, who nobody truly understands. He, too, experiences the very same refusal and the denial that Clarissa faces. The two of them, being each other's foil, represent each other's alternative.

In presenting Clarissa as a middle-aged artist, Virginia Woolf touches upon some of the themes that are central to her works. Clarissa is a character that struggles to come to terms with her new self, and desperately tries to cling onto her past self, for the world around her seem to suggest that her identity as well as her voice are now irrelevant. Her anxiety linked to her lonely

condition is the driving force behind most of her actions and thoughts throughout the novel. I believe that it is no coincidence that Clarissa is presented with the traits of an artist, for artists themselves—both in Woolf's novels and in real life—experience a sort of loneliness that resides within the way their works are oftentimes distorted and misinterpreted, just like it happens in Clarissa's case with the aim of her parties. The condition that causes people to drift towards isolation as life progresses is the same that Clarissa Dalloway attempts to fight by bringing others together and celebrate the life she so loves and cherishes.

Metaphors in *Mrs. Dalloway*

> [...] metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. (Lakoff and Johnson 3)

In *Metaphors we Live By* (1981) Lakoff and Johnson proposed the ground-breaking idea that metaphors are not simply embellishment of language, but tools that we have at our service to structure and understand the world around us. In their book, they dive into many structural and formal aspects of metaphorical language, providing a framework to study and understand conceptual metaphors, becoming a reference point for many future scholars.

In this chapter, I will focus on the notion that metaphors can shape and change the way we understand and perceive concepts and ideas, rather than on their formal and structural aspects. I have already talked about how in Virginia Woolf's time — and to some extent, in our society as well — youth was associated with creativity and life, as well as associated more with active life than old age, to which people liked concepts of decay, sterility and passivity.

I intend to analyse two specific passages in *Mrs. Dalloway* that best represent this tendency, focusing in particular on the ways in which said metaphors appear to be deeply rooted in societal beliefs and on the way they influence characters' perceptions of themselves and of the people around them. In addition to this, I will examine the importance of death and time as major

source domains[3] for metaphors of old age, as well as their constant presence throughout the narrative, particularly in the final pages of the novel.

The Dress Scene: Resisting the Passage of Time

Gullette theorises the cultural impact of the fashion cycle on our understanding and perception of concepts such as ageing and decline in the chapter "The Other End of Fashion Cycle: Practicing Loss, Learning Decline". Her metaphor about the practice of repair and reuse as methods that help us resist the pressure to discard offers a compelling analytical lens to analyse the passage where Clarissa decides to mend her green evening dress in preparation to her party (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 28).

To introduce this concept, I draw on Anita Wohlmann's reading of Gullette's work, particularly her succinct and evocative summary of the scholar's argument: "Gullette argues that the neoliberal, capitalist fashion cycle teaches us an old lesson: What is new is desirable, what is old is to be discarded and replaced by something new" (375). Anita Wohlmann's research focuses on the norms and cultural values that have been associated with age throughout the years. Her focus lies in particular in the representation of aged characters in several forms of media and in the field of the humanities. In this chapter she argues how Gullette, in fact, suggests that the entire practice of purchasing new clothes and then discarding them extends beyond material consumption. It becomes instead a metaphor for the human experience of life, and in particular, for the process of ageing. She seems to draw a parallel between the stage of

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[3] Lakoff and Johnson theorise the structure of metaphors as the process of mapping one concept onto the other. The concept that is being used to explain the other is referred to as "source domain", while the concept that is being explained is referred to as "target domain".

purchasing new fashion items and youth, and between the discarding stage and old age, which implies a sense of "decline". It is not hard to already notice how this metaphor is particularly relevant for the British society of the early 20th century, where men and especially women tended to maintain a very curated image, paying particular attention to their looks. Virginia Woolf offers us a brief insight into women's habits of presenting a polished image of themselves to the public when she writes about Clarissa's return home after the long morning spent in the streets of London: "women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 23). This passage is also, somewhat, metaphorical. Clarissa doesn't actually disrobe, instead the lines seem to hint to the strong difference between the elaborate, performative role that women undertake to fulfil their societal roles and the more private sphere of the inner self.

The context of fashion and the exploration of the natural cycle of life that clothes go through—a process of loss and decline— can also undergo a process of resistance, as Gullette suggests, through the practice of reusing what is considered ugly or old and giving it new meaning. To the element of resistance found in the practice of recycling old clothes, Gullette adds the subversive potential of repairing and mending. Gullette talks about her father's practice of repairing old tools as "a pleasure and a form of identity": "My father bought good tools and saved them and repaired them and over time gave them to me. My shop is not a museum; I use these tools frequently. He repaired things—not just (as a young man) professionally but lifelong as a pleasure and a form of identity" ("The Other End of the Fashion Cycle" 42). Wohlmann comments on this by stating that "Repair as a practice that makes worn-out things ready for reuse appears, in Gullette's account, not only as a form of resistance, but also as deeply enjoyable and identity-constituting" (376).

It would be interesting to spend a few words on a metaphor deeply rooted in most literary tradition, which is that of weaving as a form of communication and a tool for agency. Ann Bergren's *Waving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought* (2008) is a collection of some of the author's essays on the female's use of weaving as an act of construction of truth. Her main argument is that weaving becomes a form of "metaphorical speech" in Ancient Greece, as she proceeds to comment on characters such as Helen or Penelope to highlight the link between woven images, women's speech and poetic language. Penelope dictates the rhythm of the narration, weaving at the loom in the day and unravelling her work at night. Even though she is unable to speak up for herself, she still cunningly claims agency over her fate, buying time for herself and her husband and shaping her narrative with threads, as poets do with words. Storytelling and weaving are both acts that, as argued by Bergren, shape reality through form. In a similar way, Clarissa's action of working on her dress and the implied awareness of the torn in the fabric that demands to be mended becomes a metaphor that suggests her need for control over the way she is perceived in the eyes of society.

> Her evening dresses hung in the cupboard. Clarissa, plunging her hand into the softness, gently detached the green dress and carried it to the window. She had torn it. Someone had trod on the skirt. She had felt it give at the Embassy party at the top among the folds. By artificial light the green shone, but lost its colour now in the sun. She would mend it. Her maids had too much to do. She would wear it tonight. (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 28)

Woolf puts a lot of emphasis on the dynamic of the accident during the Embassy party. Someone stepped on Clarissa's dress, trod on the fabric, causing it to rip. Clarissa and her dress are passive agents in this narrative, another subtle way to hint to women's roles at events such as those that Richard Dalloway attends. Clarissa fades into the background so much that people step on her

clothes, ruin them, and she cannot do anything but feel them give in and watch them get ruined. Her act of fixing the tear, however, is a form of resistance to this passivity. She takes control of the way her dress—and by extension, herself—is perceived and performs what Wholmann presents as an act of resistance and at the same time, one of identity-construction.

What Gullette describes as a metaphorical concept, in fact, here takes literal shape into Clarissa's action of picking up a torn and used dress to give it new life. The dress here represents something associated to the past— however recent this past might be— which Clarissa refuses to cast aside just yet. I have already examined Clarissa's stubborn attachment to her youth. Wohlmann speaks, first of all, of Gullette's idea of mending as a form of resistance, and I believe this to be quite evident in this scene. Clarissa refuses to let this dress be cast aside and forgotten, just like she refuses to let her friends drift away from one another, and just like she clings onto the memories of her past and her time at Bourton. However, this does not mean that she is not aware of the passage of time, similarly to how she is implicitly aware of the tear in the fabric. Time is another major element of the novel, its passage marked by the hourly striking of the Big Ben throughout the day. It reminds Clarissa not only of the approaching party but of the dreadful notion that "something awful was about to happen"; her character exists in the space between one moment an another, in the "suspense" of life, "before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 3-4). Something irrevocable is something final, that cannot be changed, and this notion is perceived by Clarissa as something no less than dooming. Littleton writes:

> The procession of time leads to death, and time's passage leads also to the oblivion of forgetfulness. This condition of oblivion is inherent in the fractured, isolated conditions of life, in which people drift toward experiential isolation. (41)

Clarissa stands against this condition, against forgetfulness and death — which she will not be able to escape, in the end, as it catches up with her at her party. And coherently to this, she remains attached to life, to her past, to her friends, holding them together with an invisible thread, similarly to how she mends her dress. This is, in itself, a form of resistance.

As for the idea of mending as a form of identity construction, I find this concept to be present in the lines right before the passage that I have quoted, and overall to link back to the notion of Clarissa as a middle-aged woman. Right before entering her room to pick her evening dress, Clarissa spends a moment to look at her own reflection in a mirror:

> She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self— pointed; dartlike; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be her self, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point … (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 27-28)

The metaphorical concept of drawing the parts of a fragmented diamond together to compose one total self is not much different from the idea of mending the torn pieces of a dress. The concept of the fragmented self is also central in Modernist literature, and in this passage, it is used to hint to the 19th century standard concept of women, who could assume multiple roles, in relation to the different stages of their lives: in youth, they are ingenues and beautiful, then they become wives, hostesses, then mothers. And then, as Clarissa discovers, once she cannot fit any of these roles, all that is left to do is trying to draw all these parts together—all of these parts belonging to the past— to present a complete version of herself in the eyes of society. The

adjectives “pointed”, “definite” and “dartlike” are very significant in this context, too, as I shall explore more in detail in the next paragraph.

To conclude, Gullette’s main argument is that the fashion cycle has a deep impact on our cultural perception of the worthiness and the appeal of the new and the disinterest towards the old. This contributes to a widespread societal belief in age-related decline narratives, making it much more difficult for people to imagine a valid, more positive alternative to them. Society’s involvement in the cycle reinforces the idea that ageing is a process of loss and that it implies a sense of undesirability.

Peter in Trafalgar Square: a Metaphor for Freedom and Gendered Constraints

Susan Sontag talks about the opposing and biased way in which age affects women and men in her article “The Double Standard of Aging”. “Old age”, she affirms, “is a genuine ordeal, one that men and women undergo in a similar way. Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination—a moral disease, a social pathology—intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men”(Sontag 30). We have seen this to be true throughout the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway*. I find it particularly fitting for the moment where Clarissa and Peter see one another after many years of distance, both of them noting the appearance of the other, and while Clarissa declares “he looks awfully well, and just the same”, Peter’s first thought, on the other hand, is to point out how Clarissa had “grown old” and how he “shan’t tell her anything about it, he thought, for she’s grown older” (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 30).

This double standard is present, I believe, in another scene that involves Peter as well as, indirectly, Clarissa. After his visit to the Dalloway’s home, Peter decides to take a stroll around

London, and is suddenly hit by the awareness that none of his friends knows of his visit to London just yet, therefore none of them is aware of the fact that he is back from India, and of his presence within London's society. This realisation fills him with excitement, as he feels suddenly pervaded with a sense of pure and total freedom. As previously mentioned, Peter is also trying to escape his own age; whilst Clarissa's escape comes in waves of memories from the past, Woolf adopts Peter's point of view to suggest a tendency to find refuge in an illusory condition of freedom, tainting this episode with a shade of irony. The easiness with which Peter thinks to have escaped all societal constraints highlights a stark contrast with Clarissa's inescapable prison. No expectations are placed upon him, which allows him to momentarily affirm with newfound enthusiasm and vitality that "he had never felt so young for years" (38). This very same irony is oftentimes conveyed through the words of Woolf's external and omniscient narrator, which frames the whole story in a way that not only grants moments of irony, such as the one I have just described, but that also highlights a clear divergence in the social and personal world of men and women. Alex Zwerdling, when analysing Woolf's words from her diary on the aims of her novels, comments on her attempt at observation, rather than direct commentary (69). Other than conveying irony, Woolf's choice to adopt the inner monologue—the stream of consciousness—forces readers to adopt a more critical approach to the text:

> But though Woolf's picture of Clarissa Dalloway's world is sharply critical, her book cannot really be called an indictment because it deliberately looks at its object from the inside. The very use of internal monologue is a form of sympathy, if not of exoneration. To know everything may not be to pardon everything, but it makes it impossible to judge simply and divide the world into heroes and villains. (Zwerdling 70).

This insight into their minds, however, also provides readers with the instruments to notice a contrast between how seriously the characters take themselves and their condition within 1920s England: in particular, Woolf's choice to represent the British ruling class of the time lays bare a deep irony, rooted in the contrast between Clarissa's perfectionism and her need to adhere and respect the values of her social class, and the historical context, which captures the decline of the Conservative Party (Richard Dalloway's party) and the rise of the Labour Party.

As for Peter's scene in Trafalgar Square, I believe that it is a perfect example to illustrate the double-standards of ageing, especially if we pay attention to the language used to describe Clarissa and Peter's characters. Clarissa is continuously depicted as being rigid, highlighting the fact that as a woman, she has very strict standards to follow. In the previous chapter I have written about her only source of freedom and control being her parties; this is still, however, a double-edged sword, for even then she has to obey specific rules and meet the expectations that society has of a woman of her calibre. Peter, on the other hand, is allowed a moment of freedom and his constant remarks about Clarissa's rigidity, as well as his inability to understand her fixation on her parties, are what highlight the difference of their condition the most. The expectations placed upon men and women, even in the early 20th-century culture, were significantly different when it comes to ageing and image. It is no wonder that age was—and sometimes still is—such a taboo when related to women; the fact itself that it is a shared cultural rule to never ask a lady her age is testament of that. There is a deep fear rooted in the possibility of change, particularly in the idea of the ageing body, and the reason why this affects women more than it does men is because beauty, softness, elegance are qualities that are strictly stereotypical for femininity. Once the body ages, it changes, and these qualities tend to do the same. Western society's refusal to accept this simple truth mirrors a deep susceptibility to public

opinion: the change that comes with the process of ageing is more visible on women than it is on men, because the stereotypical opposition of feminine traits and masculine traits (such as roughness and broadness) favours the latter group. It appears as if, with age, the male body does not lose the traits that make it appear masculine, for the most part. On the other hand, wrinkles, grey hair, and sagging skin are the first elements noticed in older women.

Throughout the narrative, the pages are filled with metaphors and similes to describe Clarissa, insisting on typical concepts associated with old age and passivity, as opposed to the language employed by Woolf to talk about Peter's temporary escape from the constraints of life and age. Clarissa is described to be "straight as a dart, a little rigid in fact" and "as cold as an icicle" (57-60). Wohlmann comments on the use of the opposition between warmth and coldness imaginary in age related metaphors by stating that "Traditional images of 'old age' map features of seasons or plants to the aging process, suggesting a natural life cycle of blossoming, warmth, and fecundity for youth and, by contrast, withering, coldness, and barrenness for older age" (371). As for Clarissa's "straightness", it highlights once more the rigidity that characterises Clarissa's life.

I would like now to dive into the scene in Trafalgar Square, examining two passages: the first focuses on Peter's gloomy thoughts that follow his meeting with Clarissa;

> As a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London: and falls on the mind. Effort ceases. Time flaps on the mast. There we stop; there we stand. Rigid, the skeleton of habit alone upholds the human frame. Where there is nothing, Peter Walsh said to himself; feeling hollowed out, utterly empty within. (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 36)

The second being the moment when Peter is overwhelmed by a sudden realisation of freedom.

> He had escaped! Was utterly free— as happens in the downfall of habit when the mind, like an unguarded flame, bows and bends and seems about to blow from its holding. I haven't felt so young for years! Thought Peter, escaping (only of course for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was, and feeling like a child who runs out of doors, and sees, as he runs, his old nurse waving at the wrong window. (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 39)

The first metaphor employed in the two scenes is that of time flapping on the mast. The suggestion that all men are passengers on a ship evokes a sense of helplessness, as the ship will lead where the ship will lead, whilst the unavoidable reminder of time flaps high on the mast, similarly to the way the tall tower of the Big Ben marks each hour throughout the novel. Wolf then talks about the "skeleton of habit", using the word "rigid" to describe it, the same word employed to describe Clarissa. Here the author seems to suggest that habit — routine, rules — is the only thing that makes us humans. I think, however, that she refers more strictly to a definition of human intended as a member of the human society. This implies a whole set of norms, rules and expectations that, as we have seen, were prominent in Victorian society and continued to be prominent in the early 20th century. The word "skeleton" evokes a negative connotation of "habit", one that implies a condition of death.

In the second passage, the condition of freedom experienced by Peter is a consequence of the downfall of habit. These two passages are three pages apart, and yet they almost read as one. It is evident that the author is referencing back to the skeleton of habit, which acts as a constraint for the body and the mind. Once that constraint falls apart, freedom ensues. This freedom is both physical and mental, leading into another simile that sees the mind compared to an unguarded flame that "bows and bends and seems about to blow from its holding" (Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* 39).

Finally, one last thing worth mentioning, is how the state of imprisonment depicted in the first paragraph refers back to concepts such as “a cloud that crosses the sun”— which is another element associated to youth — and the feeling of being “hollowed out” and “empty”, all of which bring to mind a condition of death and decline. On the other hand, once Peter finally gains his freedom, all of a sudden, he is young again. This freedom is conceded— if even momentarily— to Peter, but denied altogether to Clarissa. As a middle aged, wealthy woman of early 20th-century England, it is not permitted to her to witness the downfall of habit and let go of that skeleton that upholds her human frame—the confinements are too tight, too rigid. Clarissa, as a woman, crafts her escape through her parties. However, this is, as we have said, an escape that is expected of her. And even though it is expected, it is not understood. “[...] after thirty years, trying to explain her” Peter thinks, “The obvious thing to say of her was that she was worldly; care too much for rank and society and getting on in the world” (57).

What Peter does not see, is that her care is an imposition and a necessity. It is a consequence of the very skeleton of habit that Clarissa does not have the privilege to lay off. Therefore, Clarissa’s identity as a middle-aged woman is treated by society in a similar fashion as ill bodies: despite also being a part of the stream of life, either category is never truly fully understood.

Death and the Passage of Time

Death and time are not only elements of metaphors, but also constant and recurrent themes throughout the novel. Clarissa, just like Richard and Peter, is very much aware of the fact that she is growing older, and that she has reached a point in her life where her youth is well behind

her, while old age is approaching more and more with every passing day. It is interesting to notice how all three characters face this knowledge in different ways, all three of them remaining stubbornly attached to their youth. Peter Walsh continuously repeats to himself that "he was not old; his life was not over, not by any means" (32), throughout different moments of the narrative, especially during and after his visit to Clarissa's house. Whilst Peter rejects the mere thought of being old, finding his own escape in moments of mischievous rebellion, like the chase of an unknown girl through the streets of London, Richard's conviction of his own youthfulness is much more rooted and established. Upon reading the passage that follows the lunch with Lady Bruton, I have noticed how Richard's momentary spur of confidence evidently sparks from a feeling of jealousy and attachment to Clarissa. We see Richard Dalloway being guided by passion and love, embarking on an impulsive quest to buy his wife flowers and to confess his love to her – which is something that he never does. "Here he was, walking across London to say to Clarissa in so many words that he loved her. Which one never does say, he thought" (84-85). And guided by this wave of youthful determination, he tells himself "here he was, in the prime of his life, walking to his house in Westminster to tell Clarissa that he loved her. Happiness is this, he thought" (86). Richard does not comment on the negative sides of his age—on the contrary, this wave of love and passion invigorates him, to the point where he feels "in the prime of his life". Yet, the narrative forces both Peter and Richard to deal with the failure of their own refusal of change and of the passage of time. Peter's made up flirt with the girl in the streets of London only lasts a few minutes; after she disappears in one of the buildings that surround him, Peter seats on a bench in a park, alone, remembering his past, his childhood—"odd, he thought, how the thought of childhood keeps coming back to me" (41)—before drifting to sleep. As for

Richard, he is not able to confess his love to Clarissa as he had planned to do. He merely gives her the flowers and listens to what she has to say.

Flowers are another recurrent imagery in the novel and function as a tool to indicate a character's intention to reclaim agency over themselves and the narrative, but ultimately failing at this attempt. In a similar way, Clarissa's decision to buy flowers herself in the beginning of the first chapter shows her determination at taking the matters of the party in her own hands. Flowers are also an important decorative element in a home, one that sets the tone and gets noticed especially during events. Metaphorically, the opening line of the novel can be read as Clarissa's attempt at reclaiming control over how people perceive her and perceive her home. However, the flowers that Clarissa buys at the florists, just like the ones Richard buys for his wife, are technically already dead. Their beauty and freshness are only apparent. In a matter of days, hours even, they will begin to grow dry and undergo the inevitable process of decay that time subjects them to. The flowers act as a reminder that, despite the way one might try to present oneself in the eyes of society, there are certain dynamics and processes—such as ageing or the dryness of a marriage that lacks communication—that cannot be ignored. Clarissa's struggle to claim control over the party and over her own story takes up the entire narrative, it is not something achieved as simply as the action of buying flowers. Richard counts to use the bouquet to back up his words, his feelings, but he ends up remaining silent. All excitement and vitality wear out; eventually, Richard gets up, goes to say something, but once again, there is no confession, no declaration of love. The flowers, then, lose their meaning and become just another decoration for the party. The narrator comments on this, bringing up the theme of loneliness once more: "And there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf" (88); neither man is able to reconcile these two sides—past and present—within themselves.

As for Clarissa, her parties and her role as an artist grant her a more unique, and perhaps complex view of her past, present, and future, all three deeply intertwined within her, all three major components of the party she spends the whole day organising. Clarissa perceives the change that is happening within herself as an ominous feeling that never leaves her throughout the whole narrative. Her need for control over the events of the party serves almost as a response to this awareness. This celebration of life, this offer for the sake of offering, is not only what helps her re-establish over and over her role in British society, but also a way to maintain her ties with her past, to remain in love with life. "… the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging … was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June" (4) and "on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved. To dance, to ride, she had adored all that" (5) are two instances that suggest that Clarissa's love is for a life that on one hand is full and active, and very much rooted in the present moment, while on the other hand, her love is also reserved for what has been her past in Bourton, her life as a young girl, the vitality of youth.

And in the fusion of these two instances lies the aim of those parties. Littleton writes, "Clarissa finds an answer to the malaise of existence in this Existence; it is her faith" (41). Existence itself is an act of creation, which Clarissa celebrates through her ability to bring together people of her past and people from her present, forcing them out of their pitiful isolation, and allowing them to experience the very Existence she is so in love with. However, just like Richard and Peter, she also cannot escape the truth that the narrative forces her to face, the shadow that seems to follow her throughout the entire day, the looming presence of the future, the uncertainty that brings her to question the success of her party multiple times, and that manifests itself in the form of Death.

Littleton argues that “the answer to individual death is the immortality of collective experience” (39). And the dialogue of past and present that takes shape into Clarissa’s parties serves as a way to enhance collective experience. However, in the midst of her event, Clarissa hears of Septimus Smith’s death, and it is as if this bubble of safety she has created for herself and her guests is suddenly popped. She isolates herself, stepping away from everyone else, contemplating what she has just learned about the death of Septimus Smith, and contemplating life, in general. In the last scene before she returns to her guests, Clarissa has a moment of introspection. It is in this scene that something profoundly metaphorical seems to happen, particularly in the passage that comes after her reflection on the reasons that might have brought Septimus to end his life:

> Then (she had felt it only this morning) there was a terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one’s parents giving it into one’s hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear. Even now, quite often, if Richard had not been there reading *The Times,* so that she could crouch like a bird and gradually revive, send roaring up that immeasurable delight, rubbing stick to stick, one thing with another, she must have perished. She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself.” (134)

The terror Clarissa talks about is something that has been hinted at throughout the entire novel. It is loneliness that Clarissa fears. She thinks about Richard, her safe choice as opposed to Peter, a man that values her privacy (“And there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf;”), as opposed to Peter with whom everything must be shared, which she cannot stand. She realises that this life she leads is her escape, and that perhaps, had she not had this life, had she not had Richard, she would have perished. For she knows in her heart – both

Clarissa and Peter affirm this multiple times – that had she picked Peter, their marriage would have not worked out, and she would have ended up alone. Now, when she looks outside the window, she sees the old lady who she had seen earlier in the day, this time staring straight at her. Clarissa has remembered her past throughout the entire day, she has come to terms with her present, and now she looks outside the window, ahead, and sees her future. “But he had flung it away. They went on living” (135), says Clarissa, and one last thought is spared for Septimus Smith: “She felt somewhat very like him – the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living” (135). I believe it is possible to read this final passage in a metaphorical way: Clarissa and Septimus are intended to be each other’s foils. Additionally, Clarissa feels herself go through death the very same way that Septimus has, “her body went through it … her body burnt” (132). And so, it is evident how a part of her – the one tied to the horrors of loneliness, the part that does not get to grow old, because cannot move forward—dies alongside Septimus, and Clarissa is now able to move forward, and return to her friends.

Moreover, the closing line of the novel is a testament to this process: it is Peter that sees her walking into the room, filling him with “extraordinary excitement” (141); as opposed to the opening line of the book, where Clarissa is presented to us as “Mrs. Dalloway”, Peter recognises *Clarissa*, perhaps witnessing a moment of freedom from “the skeleton of habit”, a momentary escape from the constraints, the fears and anxiety that have shaped her into *Mrs. Dalloway*. “It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was” (141). Clarissa steps out of the dark, ceases to be a shadow that fades into the background and finally presents herself to the world, to her friends, and that final comment, “for there she was”, suggests a sense of pride and gratification, as if the audience is finally seeing her fully; not as a fragmented diamond, not as a middle-aged wife, not as an old,

torn evening dress, but as a woman who has found her identity once more, drawing together her past, present and future and reclaiming her spot in the light.

Conclusion

Mrs. Dalloway is a novel that profoundly reflects the social and historical context of its time. All major Modernists themes find their place within the engaging narratives and the complex, yet very real characters that populate the pages of the book. By choosing to centre the narrative around a character in her middle years during a time of instability and mutability that perfectly mirrors the broader sense of change that women undergo in their fifties, Virginia Woolf tackles issues of loneliness, agency and self-worth that, despite being very relevant in the patriarchal society of the time, were still approached with a strong bias. Woolf highlights the condition of exclusion and marginalisation that particularly characterise women's middle years, and presents it as a disabling process where it is often hard to find an alternative. This quest for agency is a search for an identity that appears to be fragmented, but that can still be recovered. By allowing Clarissa Dalloway to find herself within her past, present and future, and by allowing her to reclaim her identity in her own eyes and in the eyes of her friends, Woolf contributes to the creation of a narrative that subtly shifts away from those of decline and offers a voice to women who were oftentimes victims of prejudice regarding stereotypical behaviours linked to menopause.

Mrs. Dalloway is embedded in the social and historical context of its time. Virginia Woolf's portrayal of ageing through Clarissa Dalloway, a representative of upper-class tradition in a world that is frantically changing draws a parallel to a primarily patriarchal societal construction of Clarissa's age as a disability that makes her invisible and undesirable. Virginia Woolf lays bare this ableist construction of femininity which is still very relevant in modern society.

Anne Barrett, Alexandra Raphael, and Justine Gunderson examine the relationship between images of older adults in media and people's attitudes and self-perceptions of ageing, noticing these media portrayals are oftentimes primarily negative, implying that ageing is still seen as a process of decline (39). They proceed to point out that not only are ageing narratives still very much underrepresented across media, but that they also continue to suffer a gendered bias: "As an illustration, women appear in less than 40 percent of television advertisements containing older adults (Lee, Carpenter, and Meyers 2007). Older women are often portrayed in gender stereotypic ways and fulfil supporting, not primary, roles" (Barrett, Gunderson, and Raphael 40). This continuous perpetration of negative stereotypes influences the way individuals perceive both others and themselves. This internalisation of decline narratives mirrors Clarissa's attitude towards her ageing body and her past, shifting between moments of resignation and moments of longing for her youth. To explore this ambivalence, Woolf employs the modernist technique of the stream of consciousness, allowing readers to witness a portrayal of ageing as a fragmented process shaped by memory and societal pressures and cultural expectations.

Whilst we have seen that the society of early 20th century England was still subject to the echoes of Victorian norms in terms of appearance and rules, in today's society a leading role in the establishment of trends is found in celebrities and influencers. Hilde Van den Bulck examines the complex relationship between ageing and celebrity culture, which tends to idealise youth and beauty while still dealing with the reality of age. One of her main points concerns the way media tends to focus on the celebrities' private lives, subjecting female celebrities to intense scrutiny regarding their age (Barrett, Gunderson, and Raphael, 66). This scrutiny is testament to the discourse explored so far on the gendered prejudice towards ageing female bodies: as

examined through *Mrs. Dalloway,* we can see how Virginia Woolf's subtle yet powerful critique of the cultural bias towards middle-aged women is still relevant in today's society.

Mrs. Dalloway contributes to illustrate a deeply characterised upper-class society of 20th century England that is slowly losing its prestige in a post-World War One world. Woolf represents a deeply ableist construction of femininity by opposing the inner world and memories of a younger Clarissa Dalloway, bright and independent, with her present self, a conventional member of her social class. The quest for reclaiming a sense of self and break free from the constant array of societal expectations that threaten to render her invisible and marginalised is finally complete when, by the end of the narrative, Clarissa draws together all the different elements that make her who she is: she finds herself in her past, as well as in her present, and accepts the future-self that she will evolve into. Instead of hiding in the shadow of her room, away from her guests and old friends, she steps into the light, finally taking her place into the stream of life. Virginia Woolf gives a voice to women who, like Clarissa, often fade into the background, and that inhabit a space both marginal, as their value is constantly compared with that of younger women, and central, placed under scrutiny by the rest of society. These themes, while rooted in early 20th century modernist discourse, resonate with today's tendency of patriarchal norms to dictate how ageing and women are perceived, both in media and in everyday life. With my research, I hope to contribute to the growing discourse on ageing in literature, promoting the idea that stories of ageing, especially in regards to female experiences, should not be framed as narratives of decline, but rather as opportunities to explore the complexities of the later stages of life.

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