

# A Study on Multiple Spaces in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

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**Abstract:** Since the spatial turn of the 20th century, academics have been on a journey of exploring spaces with the everlasting interest. From Henri Lefebvre through Michel Foucault to Edward W. Soja, the spatial theory has been constantly discussed and its concern has been expanded from the physical space to the spiritual space. British writer Virginia Woolf is renowned for her avant-garde modernist writings in the adoption of the stream-of-consciousness approaches, while her works are also rich in spatial connotations and ideas, which are highly consistent with the spatial theory. Based on the spatial theories of Lefebvre, Foucault Soja and so on. This paper does a close reading in Woolf's representative work, *Mrs. Dalloway* to interpret multiple spaces, concerning those in general (gender, class, nation, etc.) and those of transcendence (attic, rural, party, etc.). Looking back at the spatial narratives of Woolf's novels allows us to understand more deeply how this literary spatial practice have affected the way we perceive the world and our own existence.

**Keywords:** Mrs. Dalloway, multiple spaces, transcendence, Virginia Woolf.

## 1. Introduction

Modern spatial criticism is very much about the deconstruction and reconstruction of space, something that Virginia Woolf accomplishes in her work either consciously or unconsciously. As a pioneer of modernist literature, Woolf devotes much of her life to the innovation of literary space. The analysis of social spaces such as "urban space", "right space" and "imperial space" in Woolf's works can give us a deeper understanding of the nature of the constructive nature of social space, and of the different status, rights and living conditions of people of different genders, classes and nationalities, as well as the complex relationship of control and antagonism between them.

From the perspective of spatial theories, this paper will do a close reading in Woolf's representative work, *Mrs. Dalloway* to interpret the multiple spaces, concerning those in general (gender, class, nation, etc.) and those of transcendence (attic, rural, party, etc.). From the perspective of spatial theories, looking back at the spatial narratives of in this novel will possibly allow us to understand more deeply how the literary spatial practice can affect the way we perceive the world and our own existence.

## 2. Spatial Theories

### 2.1. Lefebvre's Theory — The Basic Theory of Space

Space, whether on a physical, scientific or mathematical level, has been conceived since ancient Greece. But the social connotations of space are not taken seriously until the mid-20th century. The first scholar to systematically theories of space is Henri Lefebvre, a French philosopher and sociologist. He is the initiator and first representative of the critical thought of space. As he puts it in *The Production of Space*: "Not long ago, the word space had a strictly geometric meaning: the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty thing...Talking about social space, therefore, sounded strange" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 1). In this book, Lefebvre breaks down the

dichotomy between physical and mental space and proposes a social dimension to space. He emphasizes that space in modern society is no longer a static and passive concept of place. Lefebvre considers space as a social product. Any space implies, contains and dissolves social relations, "despite the fact that a space is not a thing, but a set of relations between things – objects and products" (Ibid, p. 83-84). What Lefebvre aims to explain is the ideological and political implications of space, or social space. This is most eloquently articulated in Lefebvre's space, which consist of three aspects: spatial practice – about how the material world is perceived, the representation of space – about how the world is conceived and the spaces of representation – about the world in which individuals live.

Lefebvre also traces the history of the site, detailing its emergence from ancient Rome to modern time. With the decline of feudalism and the emergence of capitalism, the form of space gradually changed from the absolute to the abstract. A very important aspects of abstract space is the space created and dominated by capitalism. In the abstract space, hegemony seeks to eliminate all differences and contradictions. This explains the following interpretation of the space of difference by Lefebvre. For Lefebvre, the space of difference is a hypothetical future space that embraces difference and heterogeneity, and Lefebvre's theory of spatial trialism and the space of difference is a direct inspiration to his student Edward Soja.

With the abstraction of space, one's body is distanced from its bodily experience, thus ultimately leading to alienation. With Lefebvre, alienation is no longer a phenomenon of the economic or political sphere. In modern capitalist society, alienation has become a state of life for everyone in everyday life. As a Marxist philosopher, Lefebvre works on the relationship between space and society, and what role space plays in the process of capitalist expansion and accumulation.

### 2.2. Foucault's Theory — The Space of Power

Along with Lefebvre, Foucault is another one who makes a significant contribution to the criticism of space. Although

Foucault has never systematically dissected space in his work, it does play a key role in Foucault's thoughts. In contrast to Lefebvre's preference for the social dimension of space, Foucault focuses on the relationship between power, knowledge and space. Soja concludes that the power-knowledge connection is acknowledged by every scholar who studying Foucault, but for Foucault himself, this relationship is embedded in "a tentative theory of power, knowledge and space" (Zhou, 2007, p. 55). In Foucault's thinking, space should never be forgotten. At the same time, in contrast to Lefebvre, Foucault is more concerned with the suppression of the individual in society. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he delves into how social power disciplines the individual by examining the supervision of criminals in prison. In the first chapter of the book, Foucault's ideas on discipline will be applied alongside Lefebvre's ideas in this regard.

Another important concept in Foucault's theory is "Other Space," which has inspired Soja's Thirdspace. In *Of Other Space*, Foucault first introduces this concept and described heterogeneity as something like an anti-place, a kind of effectively formulated utopia in which the real place, all the other places to be found in culture, is simultaneously represented, contested and subverted. Such places are outside of all places, although it is possible to point to "their place in reality" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). In short, heterogeneity exists in reality, capable of juxtaposing different spaces at the same time; although they are difficult to detect. One of the common categories in modern society is the heterogeneity of deviance. It refers to places that "are arranged for individuals whose behaviour deviates from socially accepted rituals, customs and morals, such as sanatoriums, mental hospitals and prisons" (Ibid, p. 25). Foucault covers the marginalized and hidden aspects of society, uncovering the omnipresent underlying power in our lives.

### 2.3. Soja's Theory — The Thirdspace

Postmodern geographer Soja is another distinguished figure in the realm of spacial studies, who absorbs and ruminates over his predecessors' thinking so as to form his own unique spatial conception. Soja highlights the sociality of space: "Social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing in space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. There is no unspecialized social reality. There are no aspatial social processes. Even in the realm of pure abstraction, ideology, and representation, there is a pervasive pertinent, if often hidden, dimension" (Ibid, p. 137).

Soja creatively supports and develops Lefebvre's ideas. He interprets Lefebvre's spatial practices and spatial representations by calling them Firstspace and Secondspace. His best-known concept—Thirdspace, is mainly inspired by Lefebvre's representative spaces and Foucault's heterotopias. Soja argues that there is an implicit preference for lived social space in Lefebvre's theory of space, but that Lefebvre never explicitly mentions it. Soja, on the other hand, explicitly emphasizes the inclusive nature and simultaneity of real and imagined space. Soja refers to this space as Thirdspace. What Soja is trying to convey in his proposal for Thirdspace is an attempt to break up the dichotomy between matter and mind and open the mind to an open and heterogeneous space. It is not a simple combination of antecedents, but a decomposition of the two dimensions and their subsequent reconfiguration. "It is both a space that is distinguishable from other spaces (physical and mental, or First and Second) and a transcending composite of all spaces" (Ibid, p.139).

This paper proposes the concept of multiple spaces, which is based first and foremost on Lefebvre's theory of social space/the spaces of representation — the deconstruction and attempted reconstruction of material and spiritual space in general. It incorporates Soja's Third Space, which explores the creative and critical thinking in the process of spatial practice. There is also Foucault's criticism of political rights in space. Besides, this paper will discuss "multiple space of transcendence," i.e., a transcendental space where one's spiritual quest is anchored, a space that subverts the original order, breaks down the dichotomy and regains freedom and integrity as a human being. In the next section, such spaces in *Mrs. Dalloway* will be examined.

## 3. Multiple Spaces in Mrs. Dalloway

### 3.1. Multiple Spaces in General in Mrs. Dalloway

#### 3.1.1. The Space of Gender

Woolf is a brilliant and noted feminist — "Feminism is one of the issues she has thought about throughout her life" (Zhang, 2017, p. 67), so this theme in all of her work to a greater or lesser extent, *Mrs. Dalloway* being one of the most obvious examples. This novel is set in the aftermath of World War I. "Women's rights were on the rise after World War I" (Zhao, 2014, p. 28) and this is reflected spatially in what is effectively a breakdown of gender space. Woolf has said: "You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of the Angel of the house. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She is utterly unselfish...I turned upon that Angel and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her... If I had not killed her, she would have killed me — as a writer" (Gordon, 1984, p. 56). "House" stands for private space. This means that women must escape from the private space.

In Woolf's writing, we can sense an ironic tone of both reverence and sadness, and in her works, she also shows a sense of attachment to this image, while at the same time showing a sense of criticism, which is closely related to the different periods of her upbringing. This is closely related to her experiences at different times in her life. In Woolf's context, the "angel in the house" is an image that she wants to "kill" with all her might, representing the gendered division of space by the male discourse of patriarchal society and the regulation of women by this division of space. In fact, the simple modifier "in the house" already clearly qualifies the word "angel", which means that patriarchal society not only limits the scope of women's activities spatially, but that the domestic space represented by the material form of the house also the meaning of women's existence is also defined. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway is a subordinate and marginal figure in the domestic space. As a young woman, she abandons her lover, Peter, and abides by the rules of society by marrying Richard Dalloway, a member of parliament with a higher status, and becomes the noble Mrs. Dalloway. At that time women are dependent on men and their status is assigned to them; she has to choose worldliness over love. Clarissa closes herself off from her deepest desires for freedom and love and soon became a housewife. This is certainly a state of affairs that runs counter to Woolf's own thinking.

#### 3.1.2. The Space of City

"Mrs. Dalloway is known as the London novel" (Chen, 2016, p. 78). The novel gives the urban landscape a rich spiritual content through a modernist aesthetic innovation,

ringing to life the excitement, anxiety and disorientation of modern urban life. “Woolf presents the characters as divided into multiple levels of experience and perception, representing an external reality of gradual separation and disintegration: the contradiction between the city as a space of perception and a space of power, epitomising the chaotic post-war order” (Cui, 2019: 42). Clarissa sees the emptiness of her life and spends her days wandering through lies, gossip and corruption, unable to find the roots of her life.

In addition to Clarissa, there are other wanderers’ experiences of space time the construction of psychological space. The letters written in the spray of the plane and the loud noise of the car with a flat tyre attract attention, and everyone reacts to each other with speculation and even beautiful hallucinations that are difficult to understand; Elizabeth wants to break out of the confines of her living space but is afraid to walk into the strange alleys; Peter, who has recently returned home, marvels at the streets and parks of London. These give the wanderer a momentary experience of time and space, an experience that takes the form of a psychological space, reflecting the lack of interpersonal communication and the state of isolation, disconnection and anxiety in London’s urban spaces.

### 3.1.3. The Space of Power

This work also deals with the spaces of power, more obviously the spaces of class and the nation. Mrs. Bruton as a representative of high society and the mistress of the middle class. Her party is a good example of class space. What following is Mrs. Bruton and the hidden hierarchy of class in the living space by analysing mainly these two parties and some other scenes. At the beginning of Mrs Bruton’s lunch party, the maids quietly serve the food in order. With their silent service, an illusion arises from the hearts of these guest: “a wave of the hand, the traffic ceases, and there rises instead this profound illusion in the first place about the food-how it is not paid for” (Woolf, 1990, 55). From the fact that the upper classes believe that food is free, we can conclude that they do not pay attention to the working class. In their eyes, food, wine and coffee, all these things are self-sufficient, not produced by low class. The powerless class is marginalized and ignored. According to Lefebvre, “[E]ach state claims to produce a space in which something is brought to perfection: namely, a unified and therefore homogeneous society” (1991, p. 281). Thus, in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie tries to erase its differences and contradictions, trying to disguise it as a harmonious space. This explains the way in which the rich class looks down on the working class within the party. They want to deny and ignore the existence of the lower classes, creating a deceptively homogenous picture. With regard to Mrs. Bruton, the hostess of this party, who also has the highest social status among the guests, naturally sits in the centre of the table. Behind her hangs a painting of a general on the wall. This hints at Mrs. Bruton’s social status.

Then is the nation space, or the colonized place and the colonizers’ place. The British Empire’s identification with the glory of empire stems not only from the existence of London, a homogenous space that embodies the ideology of the ruling class, but also from the existence of a marginal - colonial - space outside the centre of empire. In Woolf’s creation, England, London, is the true home, the model of civilization and morality, while the colonies are in an inferior position. The civilized people who return from the colonial space to the centre of the empire, people who have had the experience of living in the colonies, return to London with a perspective that

enables them to examine the centre from the margins, and their words and actions threaten a kind of disintegration within the imperial form that seems out of place in the space of the dominant imperial discourse in London. When Peter returns from India, feeling attached to London but lonely, his Indian girlfriend Daisy makes him quite critical of Clarissa, who represents the quintessential female image of the Empire and whom he has always loved. And Clarissa’s attitude towards Peter and his Indian girlfriend speaks volumes about this.

Unlike the women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who wrote about empire, Woolf, while unable to escape her social identity as a member of the power class at the centre of the empire, does not indulge in the glorification of imperial expansion and the worship of colonial heroes. The imaginary of the British Empire in Woolf’s work becomes rich and complete precisely because she presents the existence of colonial peoples and exotic lands that wander in the margins as the Other, revealing on the one hand their backwardness, barbarism and inferiority, considered by Woolf and the power class to which she belonged as objects of indoctrination and suppressed in silence, and on the other hand presenting an ambivalent relationship with British national culture that is both antagonistic and complementary. On the other hand, they present a contradictory relationship that is both antagonistic and complementary to British national culture. In the spatial interaction between the two forces, through their influence and penetration of everyday life, they not only challenge the will to power, as represented by imperial space, to conceal all inequalities and differences, but also subvert and reconstruct the constructed myth of empire. Woolf’s politics of national space unearths the silent, ideologically marginalized other, extends it, emphasizes it, and gives it a voice through deconstruction.

## 3.2. Multiple Spaces of Transcendence in Mrs. Dalloway

### 3.2.1. The Room of Her Own — The Attic

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the real “own space” for Clarissa in her big house is a small attic room – “An attic room. Women must put off their rich apparel. The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be” (Woolf, 1990, p. 31), which, although somewhat isolated and cramped in relation to the splendour of the other rooms in the house, reveals the existence of the heroine’s own self. In contrast to the layout of the attic room, the living room is located downstairs. As a public area where guests are invited and salons are held, the living room is in fact a microcosm of the patriarchal social order, in which Mrs. Dalloway is expected to play the subordinate role of “angel in the house” in a dignified manner, while her individual existence as a woman is avoided and ignored, thus making it feel cool as a cellar.

It is a space of the self. Social space often brings about the repression and fragmentation of the individual’s self, and consequently the changes that the space in which one lives produces for the self. In the space of an upper-class home like the home, she is the wife of an upper-class person, an empty presence. The existence of the attic allows the heroine to feel sheltered and secure as an individual, because in this space she is no longer Mrs. Dalloway, she can remove the mask of the upper class and be herself, away from the tedium of domestic life. The room is peripheral to the overall structure of a house, out of sight and often unimportant, hidden and

often forgotten. The possession of this marginal position means that women reclaim their identity as marginal beings, and it is this marginal identity that makes women independent from the dominant power of patriarchal society, as spectators who can gain insight into life and existence and as confronters who can show their differences and unique ideas, which can be seen as the description of the Multiple Spaces of Transcendence. This is what Woolf's "A room of one's own". Because only then, only when the space belongs to oneself, does oneself become independent.

### 3.2.2. The Paradise of Heart — The Rural Space

The novel has a very detailed portrayal of London's prosperity, but there is a constant sense of "spiritual wasteland." The grief of the aftermath of the war, the grief of the ladies who have lost their sons to the war, Septimus to the point of giving up on life. Clarissa feels that she is no longer Clarissa, but just her husband's wife, who has lost herself. And she is once vividly alive, it is during her childhood in the countryside, when she was still reading, still thinking, and her spirit was rich. The countryside here is Burton.

Although the novel does not devote much attention to Burton — a pivotal space, both in terms of layout and in terms of thematic expression. If the London scenes in the novel are mainly about the "present", Burton's narrative thread focuses on the "past", giving a behind-the-scenes account of the main characters, including Clarissa, Walsh and Sally, helping the reader to get a more complete understanding of these character. This helps the reader to understand the story in its entirety and effectively expands the narrative space of the novel. The Burton is a paradise, a place where people can express themselves and their personalities in an innocent and unpretentious atmosphere. "There they sat, hour after hour, talking in her bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world. They mean to found a society to abolish private property, and actually had a letter written..." (Woolf, 1990, p. 17). Burton in the novel not only leads another narrative thread, more importantly, it symbolizes a completely different experience from urban life: in Burton they can fully enjoy the pleasures of life, politics can be talked about freely there, as class is ignored. There is also no oppression of space for women. In London they feel more the pressure of survival; in Burton you can communicate and even exchange ideas. "In London, there is only suspicion — like Mr. and Mrs. Dalloway, jealousy — like Mrs. Dalloway and Miss Kilman and disconnection — like Mrs. Dalloway and Walsh" (Qi, 2015, p. 85).

Woolf's literary work coincided with the transition from the expansion to the retreat of the British Empire, and the confrontation between the city and the countryside, as well as the symbolic significance of the countryside to British self-perception, became more prominent than ever. In this context, she sculpts the urban space of London, highlighting the image of the British community closely related to the empire, while at the same time heterogenising it by opening up the space of the countryside outside the city, reconstructing a space based on urban civilisation that strongly evokes people's collective identity and cultural memory, an authentic Britain in its own state of being, and decolonising the homeland. Soja's Thirdspace bridges the objective bias of the Firstspace and the subjective bias of the Secondspace, and reconstructs itself on the basis of this deconstruction, transcending the first two spaces. Here space is no longer just a place and a scene for the development of the story in the text, but also a space that affects the psychological state and values of the people living

in it, and reflects on the social life reflected in it. The rural areas, which do not exist in reality, can be regarded as one of Multiple Spaces of Transcendence, a space that being the home of heart, a decolonized, free space.

### 3.2.3. The Promising Space — Clarissa's Party

Not unlike Mrs. Bruton's party described above is Dalloway's party. This novel is set in England after the First World War. It is a world shrouded in the gloom of war, where "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears" (Woolf, 1990, p. 15). Clarissa herself is often in a state of inexplicable fear and confusion. She often asked herself: "Will she regret the fact that she is bound to leave this world forever? Would she resent the fact that everything would have to go on without her? Or would it be a relief to think that death would be the end of it" (Woolf, 1990, p. 13). "Moreover, (as she felt this morning), there is the horror of life given to her by her parents, to live out her life in peace, but without the ability to do so, without being able to do so at all; she was filled with a terrible fear in her heart. Even now, she often feels that she will perish" (Woolf, 1990, p. 14). But in the end, instead of dwelling on her confused thoughts, she busies herself with dinner preparations and became more proactive in her life. "Fear no more the heat o' the sun Nor the furious winter's rages" (Woolf, 1990, p. 15), she repeated Shakespeare's lines, facing the future with courage.

Hu Xinmei (2005, p. 135) argues: "In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf blames the war of her time on the negative effects of patriarchal culture, arguing that mankind has committed a major sin against nature under a patriarchal system. In her eyes, the damage caused by the war to the natural landscape and natural ecology was enormous, and it deprived natural beings of their original peace and harmony." It is debatable whether this idea is one-sided or radical, but it is indisputable that in this novel Woolf wants to show the positive, gentle and beneficial role of women in society, and that Mrs Dalloway throws this party to appease people.

When the news of Septimus's suicide reaches Clarissa's party, she suddenly feels a sense of déjà vu, a strong spiritual resonance. It is as if she has been there. "A young man had killed himself... He had killed himself... her dress flamed; her body burnt. He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness" (Woolf, 1990, p. 55). She is first shocked, thrown into disbelief, and even thought of committing suicide herself, but in time came to comprehension. She realizes that death is a challenge to life, an embrace, a liberation. In the end, she suddenly snaps out of her meditation and returns to the living room to be with her guests, to draw strength from death, to fight loneliness and fear, to bring everyone together. As Woolf originally thought, the heroine is the one who goes and kills herself. But by the end the suicide is set up as someone else, a contrast. Some people perish in pain, but others are reborn in pain, and the place of rebirth is the party she holds — the party she throws to comfort hearts after the war. And this moment is the climax not only of the party, but of the whole novel. This space, created by Clarissa herself with her display of feminine and gentle strength, with her awareness of the transcendence of life and death, is a gentle and powerful rebuttal to patriarchal society and a place of spiritual uplift, and such a space is where we explore "Multiple Spaces of Transcendence."

## 4. Conclusion

Through space, one can see the real state of society, rather than the false state homogenized by history and dominant ideology. Modern spatial criticism is very much about the deconstruction and reconstruction of space, something that Woolf accomplishes in her work either consciously or unconsciously. Through narrating the lives of the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf seems to make great efforts to do the management of her own multiple spaces, concerning those in general (gender, class, nation, etc.) and those of transcendence (attic, rural, party, etc.). From the perspective of spatial theories, looking back at the spatial narratives of Woolf's novels allows us to understand more deeply how the literary spatial practice can affect the way we perceive the world and our own existence.

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