

When Big Ben strikes: The chimes in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

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Abstract:

Mrs Dalloway is a typical stream-of-consciousness novel by Virginia Woolf, which has earned a lot of reputation for her. This novel is considered as an experiment of time, in which Woolf represents the chronology of time through images such as Big Ben and its relentless chimes. She also utilizes chimes as an important image to help construct a narrative, build characters, and convey the theme. The theme is comprehensive and complex; it contains the struggle of women, the authority of societal norms, and the deep thoughts of death. Virginia Woolf uses chimes to tie these together. Meanwhile, she successfully collapses time and space through the symbolic chimes, as the thoughts of characters can be traced back to the past or forward to the future without breaking the chronology limits. Making the most

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Introduction:

One of the most typical features of a stream-of-consciousness novel, according to Michaela Čechová, is that this type of narrative helps form a new text construction, and the continuity of the novel relies on the impulse of association, which evokes another. As a result, it is necessary to give the readers a temporary reference to situate them in the novel. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the chimes play that role. The chimes appear throughout the whole novel over ten times and accompany Clarissa from early morning to her party. "Time [...] occurs alongside the character", as Nicole Olivetti says. A day is divided into hours to help readers trace and follow characters through passing time and geographical location. Huihui Sun points out that all the characters in the novel can know the time from their watches, so undoubtedly, the chimes are prepared for the readers. Time plays an important role in the novel, as the original title of the book was "The Hours". As the symbol of objective time, there is no doubt chimes take the responsibility of narrative structure, the chimes of Big Ben, or physical time, in the novel represent the flow of time, reminding the reader of the novel's main thread in a nonlinear plot. At the same time, multiple recurrences also play an integral role in expressing the novel's themes.

Virginia Woolf is praised for her experiment in time; many researchers have been down on how Woolf reconstructs time in modern postwar British society and how she links past, present, and future without chronological order. Olivetti Nicole suggests the temporal experience of characters is intertwined with the consciousness of characters.

of a single ordinary day. This study attempts to figure out how chimes function in the novel, as well as the impact chimes have on narrative, characters, and themes.

Sruthi P believes that there is a relationship between time and the mental illness of characters. This study focuses on a specific image--the chimes of Big Ben and another clock-- to diffuse from one factor to multiple topics, from narrative to themes.

Chimes In Narrative.

In the novel, auditory narratives replace traditional linear narratives. The clock first rings at ten in the morning, when Clarissa is out for shopping, the sixth at 1:30 pm, when Hugh, Richard, and Mrs. Bruton have lunch, and the eighth at 6 pm, at the beginning of Clarissa's party. The day's activities are carried out in an orderly manner according to the clock. When Clarissa crosses the iconic Victoria Street, Big Ben strikes like "first the warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable", she cannot help contemplating life in London. "what she loved; life; London; this moment of June", all these evoke her love and passion for life. Big Ben emerges as a concrete sound when Clarissa feels a bit blurry and disconnected from her surroundings. Hence, Big Ben can be seen as a way of distinguishing between Clarissa's mental feelings and reality by announcing the passage of time in a public, regulated voice. The same description appears again in the novel when Clarissa's husband, Richard, goes home with flowers. He missed past glory, "It was a great age in which to have lived", but he values his life as a miracle and does not want to make mistakes. Then Big Ben strikes again irrevocably. When the characters situate themselves clearly at present, Big Ben strikes like that. The clock is indifferent to everything, and it always moves methodical-

ly associated with its absolute rules, reminding people of ineluctable reality and truth. Thus, when Big Ben strikes irrevocably, it not only gives readers a hint but it is also the character's present life, distinguishing past and present. After Peter and Clarissa reminisce about their youth together, Big Ben rings, breaking the cozy atmosphere and bringing Peter back from the past to reality. "Clarissa had grown hard", Peter thinks. The chimes of Big Ben make him realize that the passionate, shy girl of her teenage years has become a middle-aged, sophisticated housewife. Big Ben partly set up a frame for the chaotic inner world, according to Watanabe and Kazuko, because Big Ben serves as a potential reminder to the characters that the passage of time is unstoppable and irreversible, as each strike disappears, so that time cannot be paused or reclaimed, except as it is stored in memory.

We can divide the time flowing through the novel into two parts-- psychological time and clock time. Psychological time can be slower or quicker, accompanied by characters' emotions and feelings. For example, from 11 am to 12 am, the one hour contains various memories of Clarissa's youth with Peter at length, which occupies almost a quarter of the whole novel. And after the transient meeting, when readers almost forget about the chimes, "the vibrations are still reverberating", as "The leaden circles dissolved in the air". Meanwhile, every character has its own psychological time. For clock time, Clarissa needs to find a balance in conjunction with her psychology time. In clock time, she is a pretty lady getting ready for a high-society party, but in psychological time, she is a sensitive, sensual, and nature-loving girl from thirty years ago. This contrast also shows Clarissa's dissatisfaction with her present life and nostalgia for her past self. The chimes assist the transitions between different characters' consciousness in a natural manner, says Jörg Hasler. The novel contains two parallel narrative clues, describing Clarissa from the end of the morning to the end of the dinner while Septimus goes to the hospital with his wife, only to commit suicide in the evening. Woolf skillfully combines the two unrelated characters with the chimes. Big Ben struck Clarissa with the relentless passage of time, which caused her inexplicable melancholy and sadness, as well as the thought of death. Septimus' death causes them to intersect, causing Clarissa to recognize the errors of her outer life and her real self in the psychological world. Besides, Paul Tolliver Brown points out that although characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* have not recovered from the trauma caused by the war, Big Ben is part of the Palace of Westminster, so in a way, it is a symbol of British tradition and conservatism, which try to pretend that the war and modern life haven't changed anything. Thus, Big Ben still announces the present time with a cold and solemn tongue. As to Septimus, his psychology time still sticks in wartime, so he can't adapt to the order of ordinary life.

As a result, when Big Ben strikes, anxiety and fear of the war are triggered as well. "'I will tell you the time,' said Septimus,[...] As he sat smiling at the dead man in the grey suit the quarter struck—the quarter to twelve."(p69). The chimes of Big Ben put the characters' unrelated lives together with a normal experience, and Woolf uses it to develop the juxtaposition of Clarissa's stream of consciousness and Septimus's stream of consciousness, corresponding to each other so that the two are intimately connected. Virginia Woolf's subjectivization of objective time breaks the traditional narrative structure, where Big Ben serves as a hint.

Chimes In Social Criticism

When Big Ben strikes the fourth time, the two main characters in the novel finally appear in the same time field under the narrator's narration. "It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big Ben, whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London;[...]twelve o'clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street. Twelve was the hour of their appointment.[...]The leaden circles dissolved in the air." (p90)The author finally intends to juxtapose them at the same time; the former has just bid farewell to an old-time lover and has his evening dress sewn and ready for the party that night, while the latter has gone to commit himself to Dr. Bradshaw. What happened immediately after is that Dr. Bradshaw's advice and insistence on chasing after Septimus jumped out of the window to commit suicide, and it was at the evening party when Mrs. Dalloway wore this green dress Dr. Bradshaw brought the news of Septimus' death, and it seems that the parallel lines that can never be connected produce a confluence here, and it is this kind of clockwork that makes the characters and the emotions of the novel have a common point of support! It is the sound of the bell that gives the characters and emotions of the novel a common support point.

Paul Tolliver Brown also says that Big Ben is the official timepiece of London, so Big Ben represents "an authoritative sense of" London, as it is the publisher of the time, and people have no choice but to arrange their social life according to it. Big Ben is gendered male in the novel, while the clock of St. Margaret's is gendered female. "The sound of Big Ben striking[...] with extraordinary vigor, as if a young man, strong, indifferent, inconsiderate, were swinging dumb-bells this way." (p49)David Dowling presents his perspective about this situation: "Big Ben conveys masculinity: the clock tower stands above the male-dominated Houses of Parliament.[...]Big Ben's remorseless order is softened not only by its dissolution but by the more feminine bells of St. Margaret's that follow it". Woolf made the personification of Big Ben and St. Margaret reflect the binary opposition between men and women in the

traditional cognition of Western view to satirize the authority and primacy of men. Shannon Forbes suggests that Big Ben is the representation of order, which dominates urban life and showcases power and authority to Clarissa and everyone who pursues order and stability. Clarissa is considered a sober character in the novel, on the contrary of Septimus. Just as Peter says, “With twice his wits, she had to see things through his eyes—one of the tragedies of married life.”(p75). The chimes of Big Ben toll over the city from time to time, the majesty of the ruling class permeates all corners of society, and people live under the oppression of authority with no escape. Clarissa’s privilege is sustained by a “highly organized patriarchal social system”, according to Ronchetti Ann. Under these circumstances, she was forced to give up her individuality and submit to the precepts and requirements of the society of the time for women to become normative housewives. When Peter asks Clarissa, “ ‘Tell me,’ he said, seizing her by the shoulders. ‘Are you happy, Clarissa? Does Richard—’”(p49) Big Ben strikes, interrupting her answer and preventing her from thinking deeply. Women are forced to be satisfied with their lives and become subordinate to their husbands without complaining. As Page, Alex points out, she longs both to give herself over to a state of pure sensual gratification and, at the same time, to submit to a pull to realize anew who she is and the role she must play in life. Clarissa’s curbing of her desire for freedom in favor of the material satisfaction that comes with a secular life is not only a compromise of love over secular life but also a triumph of bourgeois pragmatism and utilitarianism over aristocratic romantic love.

Big Ben is not the only clock that appears in the novel. The chimes of St. Margaret’s are, in a way, antagonistic to Big Ben’s to some extent. Woolf describes St. Margaret’s clock as always lagging behind Big Ben. Woolf portrays it as “the other clock, [...]came shuffling in with its lap full of odds and ends”, which reminds people to remember “all sorts of little things besides”, while “as if Big Ben were all very well with his majesty laying down the law”. The chimes seem to be a reminder to the ruling class represented by Big Ben, as well as to the readers, that although rule and order are majestic, there is still passion in life, so it feminizes and variegates the voice of narrative, and it confirms the reality of the world employing imagination. Thus, unlike the order and reason represented by Big Ben, St. Margaret’s chimes symbolize the characters’ passion for life. Also, St. Margaret’s chimes represent the past sweet memory. When Peter hears the clock, he can not help but remember the time he spent with Clarissa. “It is Clarissa herself, he thought, with a deep emotion, [...] as if this bell had come into the room years ago, where they sat at some moment of great intimacy and had gone from one to the other and had left, like a bee with honey, laden with the moment.”(p51) The chimes of the clock

evoke warmth in Peter’s heart, and once again, it side-steps Clarissa’s once happy days as a teenager, contrasting with the real world. Nevertheless, the clock keeps telling me that “I am not late. [...] Yet, though she is perfectly right, her voice, being the voice of the hostess, is reluctant to inflict its individuality.”(p51) Victorian England was a typical patriarchal society. Under the oppression of patriarchal power, women lost their independence and were forbidden to have a unique personality. It can be argued that the bell also symbolizes in a way the image of the oppressed women of the time. The hierarchical idea of inequality between men and women is built by the clock and is constantly reminded to the reader in a sarcastic tone like a clock chiming. *Mrs. Dalloway* is not an indictment of marriage and a crusade against men; it does not have such shallow complaints and blame-shifting perspectives. It is simply an attempt to describe the facts and the truth objectively: men’s growth has always been self-initiated, with work being how they complete themselves; whereas women’s growth belongs to the self only in the unmarried age, and once she enters into a marriage her growth shifts to being molded into a housewife who is encouraged to develop worldly skills in dealing with the world. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a literary portrayal of the fact that women in marriage are like compounds that cannot exist independently as “natural persons” but must be masculinized into “gendered persons”.

The Relationship Between Chimes And Death

Though much of the novel’s action consists of preparations for a seemingly frivolous party, death is a constant undercurrent to the characters’ thoughts and actions. Woolf sees turning 40 as a turning point in her life ---- it’s either accelerate or wither away. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a reflection on the ability of a finite life to fight and overcome the passage of time. The chimes of the clock mean to Clarissa the passing of time and the diminishing of life. It touches Clarissa’s nerves and triggers in her a sense of nostalgia for her youthful years and fear for her old age, as well as a sense of emptiness and death. That is why she always feels the danger of living even one day, and repeatedly quotes from Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline*, a passage about the comfort of death: “Fear no more the heat of the sun / Nor the furious winter’s rages.” To Septimus, chimes also touch his nerves and arouse in him painful memories of the war and his fallen comrades. Time has a mysterious color in his consciousness, which not only encompasses his past thrilling experiences on the battlefield but also relentlessly refracts his present anxieties and fears. “The word ‘time’ split its husk; poured its riches over him; [...] an immortal ode to Time. [...]The dead were in Thessaly, Evans sang, among the orchids.”(p69) He wants to “flight from the well-marked territories of language, convention,

normality, and the symbolic order”, and he believes that only the dead are free; the dead transcend time and are free from the constraints of objective space-time. Septimus longs for death to come, for only death can free him from painful memories and bring complete relief to his wounded soul.

When Clarissa first knows about the death of Septimus, her reaction is considered characteristically selfish. She is caught up in contemplating life and death. At this point, Clarissa seemed to become one with Septimus, and she experienced in the flesh the strange young man at the moment of his death, believing that his suicide was in some sense her catastrophe, her shame, and her punishment. While many guests at the party know about Septimus’s death, Clarissa is the only one who cares about understanding why he committed suicide. So, when Big Ben strikes, no longer in despair, Clarissa gains an epiphany of life from the chimes. She no longer pities the young man’s death and is even happy that he dared to make that choice. “Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center which, [...] There was an embrace in death.”(p168) Such an emotional shift may seem sudden, but there is a deeper reason behind it. Many times she had spied on an old woman in a house across the street and felt that there was something “solemn” in her relaxed demeanor. “Big Ben struck the half-hour. How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching, to see the old move away from the window,[...]when, thought Clarissa, that’s the miracle, that’s the mystery; that old lady”(p119), John Graham explains the miracle: “[...] people exist in the same stream of time, each moving under the compulsion of time-flow, visible to each other and essentially alone .” It is as if Clarissa and the old woman, as if Clarissa and Septimus, who didn’t know each other, could share the same feelings and thoughts, just as Septimus’ death had given Clarissa a deeper understanding of life. Two individuals who are strangers to each other can also be telepathic. That is how death hugs.

Conclusion

The chimes echoing over the city are rich in emotional color, and from time to time cause complex and subtle psychological reactions in the hearts of the novel’s characters. It not only provides a medium for the author to transfer from one character’s consciousness to another’s but also has a profound symbolic meaning, carrying the author’s criticism of the patriarchal society and his thoughts on the issues of life and death. The chimes of Big Ben contain the conscious activities of the characters, and the author successfully crosses the time boundary, using one day in physical time to express the psychological life of the characters, and the experience of the characters is also intentionally compressed into 15 hours, which fully reflects the infinite expansion and great cohesion in the

structural layout of the novel, not only that, in the climax part of the novel, the last ringing is set in the scene of the character’s penetration of “life” and “death”, so Big Ben becomes the co-temporal contact point of the character’s consciousness because Big Ben has the continuity in the space. In the climax of the novel, the last striking is set in the scene of the characters’ penetration into the “life” and “death” of life, that is why Big Ben becomes the co-temporal contact point of the characters’ consciousness, because Big Ben has continuity in space, and thus, on a certain level, their stream of consciousness obtains the continuity of coexistence. “There is harmony between theme and technique.” Septimus does choose to die, yet millions of Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith “go on living,” and like the chimes of a clock, do not stand still because of the death of an individual human being.

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