
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Distance: the Flâneuse's Path From Alienation to Wholeness in Mrs. Dalloway

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| ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the image of the flâneuse in Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. It aims to explore how women seek identity and draw strength from ordinary life by adjusting the distance between the self and the external world. By applying George Simmel's concept of distance, the research reveals that modernity offers women the freedom to step away from their confining daily roles and become the flâneuses to see and to experience the 'others'. By maintaining a delicate balance between detachment and involvement, flâneuses experience flexible physical and psychological distance which endows them with a unique aesthetic perspective. The aesthetic dimension helps them extract inspiration and strength from the everyday life. Different from the masculine flâneurs, who tend to objectify others, women construct a community of their own through the action of looking and building up. Their empathetic capability makes it easier for them to cross the distance between people and objects, thus transcending the distance from alienation to wholeness. The flâneuse's experience in Mrs. Dalloway significantly contributes to the presentation of women's experience in urban life. It reveals the complexity of social life and women's inner world, enriching the perspective for literary research on women's agency in modernity.

| KEYWORDS

Distance; flâneuse; modernity; Virginia Woolf

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1. Introduction

In 1924, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary "One of these days I will write about London, and how it takes up the private life and carries it on, without any effort" (Woolf A Writer's Diary, 42). It suggests the themes and concerns of the novel in her mind. Mrs. Dalloway offers a female perception of the psychic and social dislocation of individuals in urban life in the face of modernity. It reveals women's spiritual experience of the fragments of modernity at the beginning of the 20th century. In the one-day novel, the protagonist starts her day by going shopping for flowers for her coming party. She wanders on post-WWI London street with her mind drifting among scattered memories and thoughts. The novel ends with her party in which people from different classes meet together. The mingling of publicity and privacy, and the contact between the alienated individual and people around form a pattern for readers to explore women's psychological experience of the war and modernity.

Women's beginning experience of modernity overlaps with the changing of their identities at home and at work caused by the War (Felski, 21). Most classic narratives of modernity focus on men's experiences in the public spheres, with the flâneur in the nineteenth-century metropolis as a key figure. The masculine bias of hegemonic modernism and the predominance of male perspective in urban scenery have been analyzed by many feminist critics. It's argued that sexual divisions in society made it impossible for the appearance of flâneuses in the nineteenth century (Wolff, 45). Emphasizing the contradictions of the flâneur, Elizabeth Wilson claims that the flâneur represents not the triumph of masculine power, but its attenuation (Wilson, 87). Several critics have emphasized women's different approaches toward modernity compared with male figures. They try to track women's

legitimate presence and different perspectives in the spaces of the modern city (Bowlby, 13). Women experience the city with fresh eyes, observing it from within (Parsons, 6). Great importance has been attached to domestic everydayness and oscillation of spaces in women's encounter with modernity. Alison Light elaborates on how women during the interwar period conservatively embraced modernity in the domestic and private domains. She emphasizes the significance of the internal structures of private life and the role of women in representing the nation within these areas (Light, 10). Wendy Gan explores the oscillating pattern between the private and public movements of middle-class women, which gives them alternative identities and experience in modern life (Gan, 74). Ching-fang Tseng argues that Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway is predominantly focused on the intricacies of the domestic sphere, rather than seeking to escape from it (Tseng, 221). Still other critics delve into women's aesthetic experience and articulation in relation to modernity (Sharma, 64). These approaches provide an in-depth exploration of the everyday life and interpersonal dynamics within the household, offering a rich portrayal of women's experience of war and modernity.

This paper aims to have an understanding of women's unique perspective as flâneuses within their ordinary lives and chart a reasonable path for their identity searching and psychological growth. To achieve this goal, this paper will focus on Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway. By interpreting the protagonist Clarissa as a flâneuse in early twentieth-century London, this study will first analyze the social and mental alienation she experiences. Then, by applying George Simmel's social aesthetic framework, it will explore how Clarissa attains healing and strength on her way to wholeness in urban modernity. Through textual analysis, we will find out the flâneuse's different attitudes towards life and society, compared with male flâneurs. Additionally, we will gain insights into women's resilience in the face of trauma and dilemmas associated with their identity.

2. The Problems of Modern Life: Alienation Caused by Distance

Distance is a key theme in George Simmel's social thinking to illustrate the interrelationship between self and other elements of life. George Simmel (1858-1918) is regarded as one of the grandfathers of modern sociology (Symons 4). For Simmel, the form of life can be interpreted as a circle with individuals at its centre, while other elements of life positioning around in a radial pattern. Accordingly, the relationship between the individual and the elements of life can be measured by the distance between them (Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* 478). Human world does not have fixed forms or stable identities but a "continuous movement" (Simmel *On Individuality and Social Forms*, 372). Cooper explains the double stance and ambiguity of distance. A distance includes two stances. Thus it allows individuals to move in different directions resulting in the action of withdrawing or transcending (Cooper, 71). The view of the world changes according to the variable distances between past and present, self and others. Social and psychological distance exerts double-edged impacts on individuals. Too large a distance may lead to alienation and indifference while too close a distance could result in lack of privacy.

With the arrival of modernity, there is a large distance between individuals' inner self and the social self which easily leads to the loss of identity. The early 20th century was faced with the rise of modernity and the impact of the Great war. Along with urban development and flexibility of life, modernity exerted dramatic influence on people's lives. According to George Simmel, the problem faced by people in the modern metropolis is that individuals find it difficult to preserve the autonomy and individuality of their existence (Simmel *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 409). The development of modern culture is characterized by the "objective spirit" over the "subjective spirit." In objective culture, people have to struggle to meet objects, standards and expectations, which neglects individual needs. This mechanism calls for rational reaction rather than emotional continuity. Individuals are required to transform from the subjective form into the form of a purely objective and impersonalized life (Simmel *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 422).

Similar to Simmel's observation of the divergence between self and society, Woolf is persistently interested in how people have negotiated the conflicts between what they want and what is expected of them (Zwerdling, 5). As Woolf claims "I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity, I want to criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (Woolf *A Writer's Diary*, 35). The disparities between the converting social forth and the individual's struggling to remain real inner self is clearly depicted in the double characters of Clarissa and Septimus. One sane and the other insane, both of them are caged in their inner trauma and social roles. They struggle to search for a way to confront the objectification and dehumanizing of a materialistic society.

This novel is set in 1923, when London was recovering from the trauma of the Great War and decisively moving forward to modernity.

the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead. (Woolf *Mrs Dalloway*, 4)

The endless scenes and sound of the busy urban landscape speak of the unstoppable moving forward of objective culture. But for the returned soldier, Septimus, suffering from shellshock, it is impossible to leave the terrible war experience behind. The mass nature of modern war losses deprives the public of its ability to mourn loudly for any lost individual (Penner, 136). Septimus, who used to love Shakespeare's play and willingly goes for the war to protect England, can't find a proper way to justify his witness of the dehumanized war or to release his elegiac burden. Coming back as a hero, he finds it unbearable to survive in a heartless way. Woolf repeatedly employs the phrase "he could not feel" to emphasize the profound internal torment of Septimus. But neither Doctor Holmes and Bradshaw, or anyone in the novel, cares to listen to his innermost feelings.

In the novel, the modern medical system also takes on the role of converting people by emphasizing modern science and proportion. Sir William Bradshaw is a great doctor for the society, yet to Clarissa he is 'obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage—forcing your soul' (202). His way of treatment requires Septimus to resolutely leave the past behind and start a feelingless life like other people. But Septimus refuses to be converted, and fails to meet the social expectation.

The impacts of the war were not endured solely by the wounded soldiers. Women, who remained at home to uphold their roles as wives and mothers, were also experiencing trauma. For highly sensitive Clarissa, she clearly knows the pains in people's heart. "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears"(10). The whirling young men, and laughing girls are enjoying the modern world. But Clarissa is haunted by fear, loss and helplessness. This generation was faced with "a race of men bodily maimed and of women mentally maimed" (Tylee, 189). The objective social mechanism requires people to move on with its emphasis on duty instead of personal emotions. But for Clarissa, love and religion takes on the dehumanizing form of a materialistic society which strives to convert, to overwhelm individuality, to destroy otherness (Ruotolo, 176). Even the idea of Miss Kilman overwhelmed Clarissa, because like the dominating social system, what she represents is a forth that tends to convert people, destroying the privacy of the soul.

Apart from the trauma of the war, modernity has also brought great disturbance to women's role at home and in society. Simmel points out that in social culture women's value is based on their relationship to men, as housewives, mothers and sex objects. What's more, women are caught in a dilemma where they are evaluated according to the standard established by men and for the advantage of men. Women are expected to please, serve and complement men. While, outside of their relationship to men, women do not have an identity (Vromen, 570). For the bourgeois woman, the modern division of labour narrowed their roles at home, therefore home no longer consumed all their energies and became hollow and suffocating to them. Meanwhile, the rapidly changing modern world gives them little space to explore out of home. Thus more and more women were suffering in the hollow roles at home. In her discussion of German feminism, Ute Frevert argues, "women were like foreign bodies in this object world of machines and bureaucracies, there was no place for "natural" feminine interests and sensitivity" (Frevert, 127).

In the novel, Clarissa is confined to the role of a politician's wife, a mother and a hostess, but she can't find the meaning of her true existence. She tries to behave like a decent hostess. But in her private room, "she cried, as a sleeper in the night starts and stretches a hand in the dark for help" (34). Rezia, Septimus's wife is another quietly suffering woman in the novel. She is alienated and traumatized by both the war and its effects on Septimus. "It was she who suffered, but she had nobody to tell" (17). The disparity between the inner self and the social expectation, as well as the distance among individuals in modern society, make the urban life cold and rigid. With no other way out, women can only retreat to their alienated private world, suffering quietly.

3. Becoming the Flâneuse: Distance as a Potential Way Out

Septimus Smith is regarded as the double for Clarissa in the novel. Both characters walk on the urban street, contemplating the dichotomy of life and death. However, Clarissa ultimately conjures up her power to live, while Septimus chooses to jump out of the window for death. What, then, does the woman gain from her street walking and mind drifting? How might women find the way to self-redemption in the disparity between authentic self and the dominating objective reality in the context of modernity and the patriarchal society?

In the novel, different from the working-class women who are trapped in their housework, Clarissa as a higher-middle class hostess, enjoys a certain degree of flexibility out of home. This moving between daily routine gives her more freedom and spaces. Clarissa neither shies away from what the society expects nor becomes overly immersed in the trapped self like Septimus. Alternatively, she keeps a flexible physical and psychological distance from routine roles in life. By doing so, she adopts the perspective of a flâneuse, which allows her to gain a fresh outlook on life.

Modernity allows for the flexible interplay of the rhythms of women's lives. Female characters get the chance to walk in urban spaces, engage in activities such as shopping and domestic errands. This allows them to keep a distance from the domestic sphere and experience the outside world. The urban street serves as a space for them to get touch with otherness. Clarissa in Peter's eyes, is always "mending her dress; playing about; going to parties; running to the House and back and all that" (44). Such a life appears to be devoid of any meaningful purpose or direction. However, the repetition of daily routine promises her both changes and stability. Modernity blurs the boundary of the public and private domain so that she can take refuge in the street as well as in the realm of public sociability. The frequent transition between the private and public spheres, and the shifting roles from that of a street flâneuse, to a mistress in the house, and to a hostess for a party, gives her a certain autonomy to maintain a distance from her inner lost self in a while. The changing rhythm and distance, to some degree, helps her to release the sense of loss and enables her to absorb energy and emotion, thereby nourishing her inner self.

In literature study, the image of the flâneur describes a detached observer who loiters in the city, shopping and watching the crowd (Parsons, 17). This term has undergone a lot of changes in its literary meaning. In terms of gender, the flâneur has long been a bourgeois male figure who represents gendered hierarchy in observing urban scenes. Women are the objects of flâneur's wandering gaze. However, Parson argues that the flâneur is not only a historical figure but also a critical metaphor for the

characteristic perspective of the modern artist in literary and cultural criticism which should not be limited to male figures only. Despite various images as an artist, dandy, detective, journalist, or rag-picker, the experience of the flâneur is always associated with concentration on walking and looking to create meaning. Moving in modern cities brings a flowing landscape for the flâneur to explore while looking at a flexible distance provides different perspectives on the world.

Woolf often refers to her love for walking in the city in her dairies. The healing power of street walking gives her inspiration and passion after days spent indoors (Wade, 274). The city offers a kaleidoscope of flowing landscapes and changing forms and gives individuals the freedom to see and to be seen in unlimited space and time. From this sense, moving gives the individual a chance to go beyond daily existence. "I love walking in London (6)," said Mrs. Dalloway. Walking on the streets of London, she is trying to capture the vitality of the bustling city life. She enjoys walking in London, to see the fresh morning scene, and to allow her mind to flow freely among the fragmentary conversations and encounters. The act of walking brings changes in emotions and thoughts. This change serves as a means to break through the suffocating aspects of life and prevent the self from being engulfed by inner struggles.

In addition to walking, the act of looking is repeatedly used in the novel. Strangers on the street look at each other. People known and unknown, look up at the view of skywriting. The action of looking weaves a web that connects all the elements on the street. Amidst these fleeting views, Clarissa is the onlooker within the narration. As she walks and stops, she chooses what to see. Clarissa is frequently found standing on, looking at the flowers, and trees, looking at the Omnibuses, looking into shop windows, looking at the crowd. Her action of looking proves that the street landscape fascinates her. In the novel, the images of windows are frequently used to represent the longing for freedom and the action to see the outside world. Clarissa opens windows, or looks towards windows to let in the sound and sight of urban life. Looking provides her with diverse directions of sights. When on the street, she can look at the world around her, while looking into a glass allows her to think of herself. She looks at the old woman at the window, and finally finds that the old woman is looking back at her. This mutual looking establishes a connection between the 'other' and herself. Therefore, the act of looking, specifically how one looks and what one chooses to look at, is a subjective construction which reflects the flâneur's psychological changes.

Contrary to Clarissa's desire of being a flâneuse, Septimus is an egoist imprisoned inside his trauma and cannot let go his painful memories. He, too, engages in the acts of walking and looking. However, unlike Clarissa, he refuses to look outwards. What he perceives is nothing but the projection of his inner torments. His view of the world is a distorted one, "The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought" (16). Clarissa releases her depression by looking outward while Septimus brings in more pains and fears from the outside. The same street scene in his eyes becomes a monster aiming at him and smashing him. "Look, look, Septimus!" Within a short episode, his wife Lucrezia claims "look" seven times. She desperately cries and implores him to see what is happening in the real world. But in his mind, whatever is happening before his eyes is aiming at his mind and torturing him. "they are signaling to me" (23). He has become so deeply entrenched in his mental illness that there is an absence of necessary distance between his troubled psyche and the outside world.

Similar to street walking, in the novel, the party to some degree shares the same function as the streets, which also allows the individual to be a flâneur to see others and to experience what is lacking in routine life. Unlike the typical hostess, Clarissa does not remain at the center of the narration. Instead, she is in constant motion, moving among the guests engaging in brief conversations and even leaves her guests to indulge in her private meditation. This continuous movement is not just a physical act but an experience of seeing. She looks at her old friends to search for a connection with the past. What's more, she expects all her guests to look. "They looked, that was all. That was enough (130). Her interactions are aimed at "kindling and illuminating" people. In this sense, the party functions as a parallel to the street, where people gather, interact, and lay eyes on one another. In both the context of the street and that of the party, Clarissa moves freely while looking at the streetscape and the people. She maintains her role as a flâneuse, with a balanced distance from others. Her stance is detached as an on-looker yet simultaneously engaged in a flexible way, providing both an outsider's perspective and an insider's emotional resonance.

4. Flexible Distance : Finding A New Perspective

Clarissa's behavior as a flâneuse, moving and looking in social spaces with a unique blend of detachment and engagement brings up the question: how does this flâneuse-like experience help her find the courage for life? The distance maintained by the flâneuse is not merely physical but psychological and emotional. The proper distance of the flâneur could be a means of liberating oneself from the constraints of life. The individual can actively enlarge the distance between the self and unsatisfying life to look beyond the concerns, and demands of everyday life in order to fill temporarily the emptiness of his life through the construction of the world around him (Simone, 51). It provides a point from which the flâneuse can view her life and the world around her with new clarity. With a flexible adjustment of distance, she can take refuge in the crowd, and adopt an aesthetic approach to look and collect.

5. The Freedom of Being Invisible

In the essay *Street Haunting: A London Adventure* Woolf describes her experience of strolling in London street :

But when the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. (Woolf The Collected essays of Virginia Woolf, 97)

When leaving the domesticity, the flâneuse can keep a distance from the 'shell-like covering' of the soul so that a sense of unreality can be gained which allows her to forget herself and move into a new reality. It is easy to find relaxation and pleasure in the crowd. Like Baudelaire's flâneur artist, the individual wanders through the urban crowd, and finds inspiration and a sense of freedom in the anonymity of the crowd. This is the freedom "to be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very center of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world (Baudelaire, 5)". The anonymity also allows for a form of private self-exploration. It blurs the boundary between the public and the private. Individuals can indulge in private thinking while passing by unknown faces. In addition, the people on the street represent a collective entity, which allows individuals to enjoy privacy and companionship at the same time.

Clarissa is enjoying such a flexible distance on the urban street. Baudelaire described the modern city experience as ephemeral, transient, and chance encountering (Parsons, 21). The fleeting scene of modern city requires her to let go of herself while the fragmentary encounter allows her to drift in her mind and stream of consciousness. While strolling on London street, she frequently stands for a moment, waiting, looking and thinking. She feels:

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...(11)

Being invisible in the crowd is different from being lost in the world. The former offers an outward direction to see others, while the latter might end in emptiness and incapability. Being part of the crowd yet detached, Clarissa manages to momentarily forget about her own identity, worries, and the mundane aspects of her life. Strolling both physically through the street and mentally through time, Clarissa is liberated from the constraints of social expectations and limitations. There are no demands or judgments, just the freedom to observe and absorb.

Apart from the flexible distance between the individual and life's elements, Simmel makes a deep analysis of the role of distance which helps people cover their usual self in sociability. According to Simmel, sociability is the play form which excludes most personal elements like character, personal moods, etc. Therefore, sociability involves a distance between an individual's personal life and the image covered with a social mask. Sociability creates an artificial world, which means social men are not in their natural and complete selves. Modern people need the forms of sociability to get away from burdens, and conflicts in real life (Simmel *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 46). Simmel takes a party as an example, in the party, people do not get involved as an individual but "abandon herself as if in an impersonal freedom of mask" (46). The unusual atmosphere gives people a chance to remain concealed and adopt a masked identity within the illusory social construct (49). For Clarissa, parties create an unreal feeling:

Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. (187)

Clarissa has a contradictory attitude towards parties. On one hand, parties involve a lot of superficial sociability, for her "it was too much of an effort. She was not enjoying it " (187). However, on the other hand, It was an offering to combine, to create. Parties allow people to leave their ordinary life. In a party there is a playful rhythm of charm coming from continuous alteration between involvement and release (114). Parties are filled with artificial elements such as fancy decorations and small talks, which helps build up an illusory and positive new reality. This illusory social construct gives people a sense of security. It allows them to express thoughts and emotions which they might not be comfortable sharing otherwise. That explains why Clarissa worries so much about whether her party could be a success or not. If it is successful, it could be a chance to help people to see otherness, to be illuminated by what is absent in real life.

People in modern world are overburdened with objective materials and struggles between personal existence and society. Streets and social gatherings help people forget these daily encumbrances so that we can shape and explore a new reality. On the urban streets, visual and auditory stimuli can serve as distractions from one's problems. Similarly, social gatherings, with their focus on interaction, entertainment, and shared experiences, provide an opportunity to set aside personal troubles. Keeping a momentary distance from daily routines allows people to be receptive to new experiences in these settings.

6. Aesthetic perspective

Keeping distance from ordinary life allows individuals to enter a constructed new reality and get in touch with the otherness. But we can not be relieved of life by merely hiding and looking away from it. What can individuals gain from the act of strolling and looking is determined by their perspective. Simmel pays great attention to the psychological detachment and indifference of urban characters. This detachment makes it possible for individuals to find the aesthetic meaning of their existence. According to Simmel, one potential sphere for the reconciliation of subjective and objective culture is the aesthetic sphere (Simmel *The Philosophy of Money*, 21). The beauty of city life can only be attained as a result of "increasing distance, abstraction and sublimation"(71). Simmel explains the difference between artistic representation and actual existence. He argues that genuine artwork modifies our perception of the original into a novel reality (Symons, 52). Aesthetic dimensions can be found in "the flat surface of everyday life (Frisby, 74)". The aesthetic perspective can help individuals to keep a distance from the immediacy of things and the material function of objects in life. In *The Painter of Modern Life* Baudelaire depicts an artist-flâneur M. C.G who gazes at the fleeting landscapes in the city during daytime with his sensitive disposition. When night comes, he records his impression and memory of urban scenes on paper by artistic creation to find beauty and harmony.

In some sense, Clarissa is such a leisured, detached city observer who keeps an aesthetic tendency to gaze at otherness and look for meaning of her existence in everyday life. The artistic gaze of the flâneuse builds up a subjective reality. This perception and openness to life help individuals find beauty in urban streets as well as the fragments of ordinary life. For Clarissa, The busy traffic, shops, passers-by, plants, and birds all form a transitory and vivid landscape within her mind. Pearls and salmon catch her attention not due to their material value but because of their association with her memory of her father and uncle before the War. With her moving perspective, The urban scenes are presented to the reader's eyes like impressionist paintings. This artistic form, adopted by both painting and the literary description of the urban scenes, captures the fleeting moments with a subjective perception of a scene. The image of the world is not objectified but filtered by the protagonist's subjective feeling and becomes an aesthetic view of life. Take the description of the flowers as an example.

it was the moment between six and seven when every flower—roses, carnations, irises, lilac—glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds; and how she loved the grey-white moths spinning in and out, over the cherry pie, over the evening primroses! (14)

Clarissa captures the beauty of the flowers in the moment with an artistic perceptive. Firstly, the use of "softly", "purely" and "misty" implies a delicate, almost ethereal quality. In contrast, within this backdrop, the images of the "burning" flowers and the spinning moths are projected with remarkable vividness. In addition, the diverse range of colors and light create a rich and engaging composition. Each flower is emphasized by the detailed naming and coloring, shining with its unique beauty at this moment. Thirdly, "how she loved" indicates that the scene is not just an objective description but is colored by the emotions of the observer. The flower scene is filtered through her eyes like an impressionism painting which instills on her a burning passion and vitality. Clarissa is like an artist who is able to distill the very essence of fleeting moments with her sensitivity and acute artistic perception. "She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on" (8). As an onlooker of the ordinary moment of her life, she finds meaning and strength for her existence with the creative "enormous eye".

The sky emerges as yet another scene intently gazed upon by the protagonist. When Clarissa feels the emptiness in the process of her life, she often stops to look at the sky. Looking at the sky allows her to momentarily break free from reality and enter a realm of spiritual freedom. Like an impressionist painting, the sky takes on various styles. The Psychological distance between the beholder and the object can lead to new views. "But there it was—ashen pale, raced over quickly by tapering vast clouds. It was new to her" (204). The sky holds of something of her own, and also reveals something new. The shifting clouds and the changing colors of the sky remind her of the transience of life. The boundless sky presents to her the insignificance of human existence in the face of the vast universe. That is the function of artistic perspective. When she looks at the sky, she is in fact projecting her own complex inner state onto it. It's a way for her to externalize and make sense of her own feelings. Meanwhile the sky introduces her to novel perspectives which triggers her profound thinking on time, space, human existence and even the whole universe.

This ability to view the world through an aesthetic and discerning lens impacts how she sees the urban street in her search for meaning in the city. In addition, with artistic sensibility and a special distance, the flâneuse perceives the play-like effect in the interactions with people. Even the conversations and reactions among people take on an aesthetic connection. It's like a play, in which each person is a character of a larger narrative. A motor car suddenly stops on the side of the pavement, promoting a series of reactions. "The car had left a slight ripple(19)." Clarissa captures the invisible, inaudible atmosphere on the city street. In her perceptive sight, the disturbance caused by the car is like a theatrical spectacle which stirs a feeling of sudden sobriety and dignity among the crowd. Similarly, the skywriting catches people's attention and they begin to look up one by one. The view presented through Clarissa's eyes is parallel to a dramatic entrance in a play. People start moving and interacting after a special event occurs, in a way similar to how characters in a play do. Being an on-looker, Clarissa absorbs the urban scenes as if watching a drama. This

artistic effect of street scenes snaps her out of her mind-drifting and find a connection to people. When she goes back to her role of Mrs Dalloway, "she felt like a nun who has left the world and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions"(31). Being a perfect hostess is what everyone expects of her. But Street walking gives her the time and space to breathe in the fresh air of otherness and the aesthetic perspective to explore her everyday experience. When she goes upstairs slowly and returns to her privacy, she still habitually pauses by the open staircase window to feel the "the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window" (33). The outside world helps individuals build up meaning and strength to conquer the boredom and emptiness of the fettered self. By keeping the detachment with ordinary life and the crowd, Clarissa can let in all the fragments of modern city life, and abstract the meaning and power through aesthetic perspective.

Parallel to the street scene, Clarissa's party also has a play-like effect. Clarissa mentions several times the meaning of her parties. "a meeting point, a radiance no doubt in some dull lives, a refuge for the lonely to come to" (40). Holding parties is a routine for Mrs Dalloway as the wife of a successful politician. However, it is through an aesthetic and creative perspective that Clarissa endows the party with a special meaning for people. For many, going to a party is a departure from the monotony of daily life. It offers a chance to experience something different, to be part of a vibrant and energetic social scene. As the hostess of the party, Clarissa designs everything like the director of a play. She takes charge of creating the party environment, choosing guests and setting the atmosphere for the stage. When the play starts, the hostess moves freely between involvement and release, focusing on different episodes of the play. Just like Peter's comment, Clarissa "had a sense of comedy that was really exquisite, but she needed people, always people, to bring it out (86). By holding a party, Clarissa is creating a drama of her own, allowing people to see and to be seen in a different way from ordinary life.

As Simmel puts it, "All art changes the field of vision in which we originally and naturally place ourselves in relation to reality. It reveals to us the spirituality of existence through which it is related and made intelligible to us" (Simmel *The Philosophy of Money*, 478). A proper distance from reality offers the potentiality of aesthetic perception. It helps the flâneuse break free from the mundane, extract and sublime something beautiful from ordinary scenes. Through her discerning eye and sensitive perception, she absorbs the essence of beauty and philosophy of life from these ordinary occurrences, thus building up a sense of meaning and purpose for her life.

7. The Transcendence: Female Tendency to Cross the Distance

Similar to the artist-flâneur, women enjoy the privacy of being in the crowd, and enrich their interpretation of the world through an aesthetic perspective. What makes their experience special is that they have a transcending quality that allows them to bridge the gap between themselves and others, between fragments and wholeness.

Women's inherent sensitivity enables them more readily to empathize and establish connections with others. In the novel, Clarissa adopts an aesthetic perspective to observe the flowing urban landscape and soundscape. She diminishes her imprisoned self by using the "enormous eye" to get into the outer world. Unlike objectifying the 'other,' she integrates herself as a part of the world, thereby constructing her own community. According to Peter's comment, Clarissa has a women's gift of "making a world of her own wherever she happened to be" (83). By perceiving the world in this way, she becomes a part of a community that is not defined by traditional boundaries but by a shared emotion and a sense of connection to the urban environment. This integration allows her to construct a unique form of community, in which she can temporarily forget her trapped self and find companionship with others. With her theory of transcendence, Clarissa builds up her community and seeks for meaning from the people and events around her rather than from within herself (Olson, 72).

the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death (167).

In Clarissa's eyes, there is no objectification, but a complement between self and others. She understands the world by instinct and enters others' lives and minds easily as if looking into a mirror. This process also involves an artistic perspective of nearness and distance. In the novel, Clarissa is the only one from the bourgeois class to feel a connection with Septimus's death. Hearing the news of the stranger Septimus's death, she feels "somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace". She goes through the pain of this young man both through her body and mind. Clarissa and Septimus are so different from each other, yet share the identification of struggle and incapability in life and death. The man preserves his self through death while she manages to revive. After this deep psychological involvement with the possibility of death, there is an obvious change of direction of gaze. The view of the changing sky and the unexpected mutual gaze between her and the old lady living in the opposite room distances her from the intensified pain of life and death. From aesthetic transcendence, Septimus's death, her struggle between life and death, and the old lady's moving and crossing form a circle reflecting each other. In some sense, they complete each other in this moment. Through the change of psychological distance, the boundary of the physical world disappears and Clarissa gets the meaning of wholeness in this fleeting moment. Whatever action is taken, time is still flowing and "all this is still going on". Life does not end after death but continues existing through the everyday moments. She sees a pattern beneath the surface of life and finds the

strength to go back. This is a highly condensed moment in which life and death merge, and people from different classes meet together.

This process of transcendence involves crossing the distance from self to others as well as from fragments to integrity. According to the definition given by Baudelaire, "modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable" (Baudelaire, 7). In this highly fragmentary modern world, women manage to build up a continued and eternal meaning for their existence. Unlike the objectifying tendency of modern culture, feminine culture, is more concerned with repetition and continuity. They are more whole beings, less differentiated (Felski, 48). For both Simmel and Woolf, there is a clear connection between fragmentary moments and wholeness. Simmel believes that every point in life conceals aesthetic significance. There is a potential transition from the fragmented aspects of our experiences to a cohesive totality, and simultaneously, from the individual's subjective perspective to a more profound universal understanding. It is possible to search for the total beauty and meaning through the "flat surface of everyday life" (Frisby, 76). This idea coincides with Woolf's presentation of women's searching for meaning in fragmentary moments and everyday repetition in Mrs Dalloway. Clarissa persistently voices the value of moments in life. She loves "this, here, now, in front of her", "this moment of June". She builds up her courage in life by plunging into the heart of moments, and "being part of it" (5). This spirit of building up can be found in both Clarissa and Lucrezia. Tormented by the abnormal marriage, Lucrezia still manages to search for something beautiful in life. She enjoys the small pleasures of buying flowers and the temporary peace of making hats. "Like a bird alighting with all its claws firm upon the bough (109)", Lucrezia builds life up, "build it up, first one thing and thing another (106)". Clarissa is also described as a bird "gradually revive, send roaring up that immeasurable delight, rubbing stick to stick, one thing with another (135). Like birds, women have the ability and tendency to build up and cling to home. They usher in the fragments of everyday life just like picking up sticks one by one to build up their own order and community.

Here we can trace women's experience of being flâneuses in modernity. Firstly, much like the artist-flâneurs described by Baudelaire, female flâneuses find a sense of freedom and refreshment within the crowd. The flexible distance in the urban crowd provides them with a space where they can leave their imprisoned self, looking outward to others. Secondly, women, with their inherent sensitivity, take an aesthetic perspective approaching the modern urban street. They observe and accumulate impressions of the cityscape, much like an impressionist artist capturing images for a masterpiece. However, there is a notable difference between the flânerie of women and that of men. Male flâneurs often seek to maintain their authority and superiority through their masculine gaze. In contrast, female flâneuses build meaning in their lives on a more balanced relation to the outer world. By maintaining a delicate distance between detachment and involvement, flâneuses can form a unique connection to the world around them. They do not objectify people or elements in their life. Instead, they perceive themselves as an integral part of the world and experience it accordingly. Through this approach, they construct their own sense of community, which makes them feel like a part rather than as outsiders. The connection to others gives them a sense of unity and belonging, helping them establish purposes and identity. What's more, women, in their role as flâneuses, have the ability to unearth the beautiful aspects of ordinary life through their creative and artistic vision. This new way of perceiving reality equips them with the strength to continue fulfilling their domestic responsibilities, and makes life more bearable. Additionally, women's characteristics of empathy and sensitivity enable them to uncover deeper meanings in life so that they can transcend the fragmentary moments and gain insights into the dynamics of human existence.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa, like an artist, tries to understand the meaning of life and death through street walking and mental wandering. The changing distance between the self and reality, the interplay of involvement and transcendence brings her a new vision of human beings' existence. Changing impressions of the fluid modern world provide her with the sources to extract power and create meaning from fragments of everyday life. Similarly, as a modernist writer, Virginia Woolf perceives the world and builds up meaning through recording, absorbing, and subliming moments of being. For Woolf, life is made up of moments of being and moments of non-being while the former usually involves intensified emotion and a sudden violent shock. Moments of being brought to an individual a revelation of some order and pattern behind the appearance. During these moments, individuals break the limits of the physical world. They can delve into a universal consciousness to find a spiritual transcendence to the wholeness of being. The shocking and intensified feelings during moments of being lead to an understanding of a pattern behind appearances. Writing is a way for her to get a connection with otherness, as well as a way of seeking peace and consolation during the war times. Through writing, she finds reason behind emotion, goes deep into characters' minds and explores the order of true reality. To Virginia Woolf, this is a philosophy which helps her enjoy writing to unveil "the hidden pattern behind the cotton wool" (Woolf Moments of Being, 72). The aesthetic spiritual transcendence helps the individual find the meaning of the wholeness in everyday, mundane moments of life.

8. Conclusion

Detachment and fragmentation are characteristics of modernity. The constantly changing stimuli in urban life as well as the trauma of the war leave people at the beginning of the twentieth century haunted by fear and loss. It was during this time that

women, who used to be confined to the role of a perfect wife, mother, and hostess at home, began to get in touch with otherness. Changing physical and psychological distance gives them the possibility to become the flâneuses, seeking comfort in the fleeting urban landscape. Clarissa, the higher-middle class hostess, faced with loss of youth and lack of meaning for life, manages to conjure up courage and strength for her existence. Through active gazing, searching, and combining, the flâneuse finds her way to be connected to the outer world. Unlike the egoist male characters, the protagonist Clarissa takes an aesthetic distance from her ordinary life. Strolling on the modern city street, she allows her mind to flow freely between past and present, among flowers, trees, sky view and passers-by, etc. The action of seeing and being among people helps her extract energy and meaning from the fleeting moments. In this process, she builds up a community of city scenes, in which human beings become a small internal part.

Similarly, by holding a party, she moves through crowds of people, creating gatherings for those acquaintances who are otherwise scattered in the city. This coming-together of individuals within a social group offers people the chance to see and to encounter, which is another form of the flânerie in the crowd. Through empathetic transcendence, she crosses the distance between self and others and gets insight into the pattern and rhythm underlying reality. The flâneuse reaches wholeness through collecting and subliming fragmentary moments. In her self-built community, where nature and human beings coexist and merge together, sorrows become so small that they can be shared and healed. In the imaginary community, the flâneuse finally finds the power to embrace life.

For Simmel, the aesthetic perspective offers a way to transcend the fractured nature of modern society. Meanwhile, it could be a healing power for the alienated individual in urban life. As a subjective strategy, this dimension may have its limits of illusion and contradiction. However, the aesthetic perspective of distance can be a way of self-redemption for those who are confined in domesticity and cannot break away. Just like Clarissa, she has no way to stop the loss of youth or the moving of society, but she actively takes action to build up meaning on the trivial of daily life, to enjoy the “buds on the tree of life”. Her recognition of the rhythm of falling, moving, and reviving makes life more tolerable. The positive side of modernity gives women the flexibility to move as flâneuses to take refuge on the streets and to establish a connection with others. The pleasure of being solitary and invisible in the crowd helps them liberate the hidden side of the self. The flexibly changing distances between the inner self, life’s immediate elements, and otherness in life offer spaces for them to search for different dimensions of self and identity. What’s more, through their flânerie, women demonstrate their particular ability to be agent of modernity. What they present is an interrelated and web-like relation among nature, society, self, and others. Catching the flickering moments in ordinary life, the flâneuse finds a possible way to cross the distance from alienation to wholeness.

The novel begins with Clarissa’s action of going out to buy flowers and ends with her moving back to the party. It is only through the flâneuse’s active adjustment of physical and psychological dimensions of distance, can she proactively change the rhythm of life and build up her own identity. The female figure we have been examining establishes her identity as an active flâneuse in the context of modernity. She emerges as an artist and a hostess in her own life instead of an escapist. Her actions are not ones of passive and detached observation but rather of flexible engagement. She actively moves through life, igniting sparks of inspiration within herself and others. Through these actions, she constructs her own unique community, which provides her with the comfort and strength to move on. Through this journey, she finds the meaning of her existence in the modern world.

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