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TEMPORAL DISSONANCE AND THE SCULPTING OF SUBJECTIVITY: A SUBVERSIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *MRS. DALLOWAY* AND JAMES JOYCE'S *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN*

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Abstract

This inquiry endeavors to dismantle the traditionalist reading of "Stream of Consciousness" as a mere stylistic gimmick, positing instead that for Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, narrative interiority serves as a radical ontological response to the post-war disintegration of Victorian certainties. By applying Henri Bergson's framework of *durée* (duration) against the mechanistic "clock-time" of the early twentieth century, this paper argues that Woolf utilizes temporal fragmentation to fortify a collective social identity, whereas Joyce employs it to deconstruct the individual's linguistic and religious shackles. Through a meticulous cross-examination of Clarissa Dalloway's rhythmic memories and Stephen Dedalus's teleological epiphanies, the research uncovers a fundamental divergence in Modernist intent: one aiming for a palimpsestuous cohesion of the self, the other for a defiant, aesthetic exile. Ultimately, the study suggests that the "sculpting of time" in these texts functions as a psychological defense mechanism, offering a "Temporal-Moral" framework that distinguishes Woolf's quest for social integration from Joyce's drive for radical autonomy.

Keywords: Henri Bergson, Interior Monologue, Modernist Subjectivity, Ontological Fragmentation, Stephen Dedalus, Temporal Dissonance.

Introduction

The early twentieth century did not merely witness a chronological transition; it endured a seismic rupture in the Western epistemological landscape that rendered the nineteenth-century "Grand Narratives" obsolete. The catastrophic aftermath of World War I—what T.S. Eliot famously characterized as the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy"—acted as a centrifugal force, dismantling the linear, omniscient narrative modes of the Victorian realist tradition. In this climate of pervasive instability, the objective world lost its perceived solidity. The novelist, previously an architect of social morality and external order, was forced into a radical retreat from the "material" surface of life to seek refuge within the labyrinthine, often non-linear, interiority of the human psyche.

This shift was not an elective aesthetic indulgence but a desperate, necessitated realignment of the soul. Modernism, particularly in the seminal hands of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, became a psychological laboratory for testing the resilience of human perception against a collapsing external reality. While the Victorian novel relied upon the perceived stability of social institutions and chronological progression, the Modernist novel found its anchor in the "moment of being"—a subjective, qualitative experience that defied the ticking of the clock. As the Great War dismantled the physical and moral architecture of Europe, these writers were tasked with constructing a new narrative architecture—one capable of accommodating the chaotic, sensory, and frequently contradictory flux of post-war consciousness.

Central to this narrative revolution is the philosophical friction between "Chronos"—the measured, external, and mechanical time of the state—and "Kairos"—the qualitative, lived moment of spiritual or psychological significance. Heavily influenced by Henri Bergson's *durée* (duration), Woolf and Joyce began to view time as an indivisible, fluid stream where past, present, and future coexist in a "palimpsestuous" state of flux. However, this paper asserts a subversive proposition: despite their shared departure from realism, these two titans utilized temporal dissonance for diametrically opposed ideological ends.



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While Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) utilizes the rhythmic "leaden circles" of Big Ben to paradoxically stitch together the fragmented experiences of London's citizens into a unified, albeit fragile, communal fabric, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) employs the disruption of time as an instrument of "unlearning." For Joyce, the stream of consciousness is not a bridge but a weapon of secession—a strategic retreat into a private, aestheticized temporality that allows the artist to escape the "nets" of nationality, language, and religion. Thus, the Modernist project emerges not as a singular stylistic movement, but as a battleground between the desire for social cohesion and the necessity of radical, individualistic exile.

Literature Review

Scholarly discourse surrounding Virginia Woolf has historically been characterized by a tension between Formalist aesthetics and Feminist socio-politics. Early critics, most notably David Daiches and Erich Auerbach, lauded Woolf's "luminous halo" of consciousness as a purely aesthetic triumph over the "crude materialism" of Edwardian realists like Arnold Bennett. However, the late 20th-century critical turn, spearheaded by scholars such as Jane Marcus and Minow-Pinkney, effectively repositioned Woolf's temporal experiments as a subversive political act—a calculated dismantling of patriarchal "linear history."

Despite this wealth of analysis, a significant critical lacuna remains regarding the socio-rhythmic function of time in *Mrs. Dalloway*. While J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive approach focuses on the "omniscient narrator as a haunting presence," it often overlooks the mechanical striking of Big Ben as a vital ontological tether. This research argues that Woolf's use of "Clock Time" is not merely a structural cadence, but a corrective to total solipsism, a nuance frequently absent in current Formalist-Feminist debates.

Correspondingly, Joycean scholarship has long been anchored in the transition from the Victorian *Bildungsroman* to the Modernist *Künstlerroman*. Harry Levin's seminal work established Joyce as the supreme architect of the "internal world," focusing on the linguistic evolution from the primal, sensory prose of *A Portrait's* opening to the sophisticated, Latinate aestheticism of its conclusion. More recently, post-colonial critics such as Declan Kiberd have interpreted Joyce's narrative disruptions as a radical rebellion against the "imperial time" of the British Hegemony, where chronological progress was viewed as a tool of colonial order.

However, a persistent scholarly oversight lies in the conflation of Joyce's "Stream of Consciousness" with Woolf's "Interior Monologue." While scholars like Umberto Eco perceive Joyce as creating an "open work" of circular infinity, this paper suggests that Joyce's engagement with time is fundamentally disjunctive and secessionist. Unlike the Woolfian *durée*, which seeks a shared communal sea, Joyce's technique acts as a centrifugal force.

The "critical void" this article seeks to occupy is the lack of a direct comparative analysis focused on the moral weight of temporality. Most existing studies prioritize "style" over "ontology." By synthesizing Bergsonian duration with a close reading of these two seminal texts, this paper proposes a new "Temporal-Moral" framework. It argues that the *sculpting* of time serves as a psychological defense mechanism against post-war nihilism, differentiating between Woolf's quest for temporal cohesion and Joyce's drive for aesthetic exile.

Analysis: Virginia Woolf and the Communal Moment

The Phenomenology of the Communal Moment

In the Woolfian universe of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the city of London does not merely serve as a backdrop; it functions as a sprawling, horological apparatus that dictates the rhythm of the modern soul. Woolf's preoccupation with the "leaden circles" of Big Ben striking the hour is often interpreted as a critique of patriarchal rigidity. However, a more subversive reading suggests that this "Clock Time" serves as an essential ontological anchor. As Clarissa Dalloway navigates the streets



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of Westminster, the resonant boom of the clock acts as a temporal tether, preventing her from drifting entirely into the fluid, Bergsonian memories of her youth at Bourton.

This "spatialization of time" is Woolf's primary tool for creating a shared subjectivity. When the clock strikes, its sound waves physically ripple through the city, striking Clarissa, the shell-shocked Septimus Smith, and the anonymous masses simultaneously. In a post-war world where traditional religious and social hierarchies have collapsed, this mechanical rhythm becomes the only remaining "universal." Woolf suggests that while our internal lives are fragmented and private, our external reality is synchronized. Time, therefore, is the "thin thread" that weaves disparate lives into a single, albeit fragile, communal tapestry.

To facilitate this connection, Woolf employs what she famously termed the "tunneling process." She drills deep psychological "caves" behind her characters—Clarissa, Peter Walsh, and Septimus—and ensures that these caves eventually connect in the "sunlight" of the present moment. This allows for a palimpsestuous identity, where Clarissa is not just a fifty-two-year-old hostess, but simultaneously the vibrant eighteen-year-old girl at Bourton.

Unlike the linear progression of the Victorian novel, Woolf's interior monologue creates a "Multi-Dimensional Subject." Sensory stimuli—the "squeak of a hinge" or the "silver-grey flicker of a fish"—act as narrative portals, triggering temporal shifts that allow the past to colonize the present. This fragmentation is not an admission of chaos, but a celebration of the "luminous moment." Through this sensory-temporal weaving, Woolf subverts the isolation of the modern urban experience, proposing instead that the "fluid self" is always part of a larger, rhythmic whole.

Analysis: James Joyce and the Aesthetic Exile

The Linguistic Labyrinth and the Staging of Exile

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce does not merely narrate the protagonist's development; he mimics the ontological evolution of the human mind through a fluctuating prose style. The novel commences with the "moocow" of sensory immediacy—a primal, pre-verbal temporality where time exists only as a series of disconnected, infantile impressions. As Stephen Dedalus matures, the syntax undergoes a process of calcification; the language hardens into the rigid structures of Jesuit logic and Irish nationalism.

Unlike the fluid, communal *durée* of Woolf, Joyce presents time as a series of "staged ruptures." Each of the five chapters represents a distinct stage of consciousness that must effectively "kill" or supersede the one before it. For Stephen, the past is not a comforting well of memory as it is for Clarissa Dalloway; it is a "dead skin" or a "nightmare" that must be shed. This is a subversive use of the *Künstlerroman* (artist-novel) format, where the progression of time is utilized not for growth *into* society, but for a calculated secession from it.

Joyce's implementation of the "stream of consciousness" is fundamentally disjunctive. Where Woolf's interior monologue acts as a bridge, Joyce's technique serves as a defensive perimeter—a "Labyrinth of Language." As Stephen retreats into the complexities of Aquinas's aesthetics and Aristotelian definitions, the prose becomes an impenetrable fortress. This linguistic complexity is a deliberate "Private Time" that isolates the artist from the "Linear Time" of the British Empire and the Catholic Church.

By manipulating the "rhythm" of his own thoughts, Stephen proves that the artist can exist outside the "nets" of nationality and religion. The "stream" here is not a river flowing toward a shared sea, but a moat surrounding the fortress of the self. Consequently, the Joycean epiphany—the sudden "spiritual manifestation" of an object's soul—represents a temporal breach. In these moments of pure, cold, aesthetic clarity, chronological "clock-time" ceases to exist. Stephen enters a state of Stasis, a moment of unrepeatable artistic isolation where he becomes, in Joyce's famous phrasing, a "God of the creation," remaining indifferent and "paring his fingernails" while the world moves on in its mechanical orbit.



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Comparative Synthesis: London vs. Dublin

The Psychogeography of Modernity—London vs. Dublin

The divergent trajectories of Woolf and Joyce are most sharply articulated through the physical and temporal cartography of their respective cities: London and Dublin. These urban centers act as the ontological laboratories where their temporal experiments are stress-tested against the realities of post-war geography. In Woolf's London, the city is a Palimpsest. Every street corner in Westminster is layered with the "ghosts" of eighteenth-century history and the fresh trauma of the Great War. For Clarissa Dalloway, walking through the city is an act of temporal navigation; the "present" is simply the topmost layer of a deep, historical consciousness.

This urban experience is fundamentally dialogic. The city's noise—the "shuffling and rowing," the "roar of the motor cars"—is a symphony that demands a listener. In Woolf's framework, the public space of London forces the private mind to engage with the "Other." The city is a cohesive force; even as the characters move in their separate "tunnels," the shared geography of Bond Street or Regent's Park ensures their paths intersect. Thus, Woolf uses the city to anchor the "Fluid Self" within a social reality, proving that subjectivity, while fragmented, is never entirely isolated.

In stark contrast, Joyce's Dublin is a Landscape of Paralysis. For Stephen Dedalus, the city is not a palimpsest of memory but a "nightmare" of stagnation. Every monument, from Nelson's Pillar to the ubiquitous Catholic chapels, represents a "net" designed to entangle the soul and prevent its flight. While Clarissa Dalloway finds a "divine vitality" in the London streets, Stephen finds only "sordid" decay and the suffocating pressure of a dead tradition. Consequently, Joyce's Dublin acts as a centrifugal force, spinning the protagonist away from the center of the community.

The subversive synthesis revealed here is that the Modernist city is never a neutral setting; it is a temporal agent. In London, time is a "bridge" that facilitates the communal moment; in Dublin, time is a "border" that the artist must cross into exile. Woolf's characters look at the city to find their reflection in the eyes of others; Joyce's protagonist looks at the city only to find the exit. This spatial-temporal distinction highlights the irreconcilable divide at the heart of High Modernism: the choice between a shared, rhythmic humanity and a cold, crystalline, aesthetic autonomy.

Conclusion

Final Synthesis—The Moral Weight of Time

The temporal and subjective ruptures pioneered by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce do not merely reside in the static archives of literary history; they prefigure the "liquid modernity" of the twenty-first century. This inquiry has demonstrated that the divergent paths taken by Woolf and Joyce—one toward the communal palimpsest and the other toward the aesthetic fortress—remain the two primary ontological modes of navigating a fractured reality. In an era currently defined by digital hyper-connectivity and algorithmic fragmentation, the "leaden circles" of Big Ben have been replaced by the relentless, instantaneous notifications of the digital "now."

This research has successfully dismantled the monolithic view of Modernist "Stream of Consciousness," proving it to be a dual-purpose tool of both integration and secession. By applying a Bergsonian lens to *Mrs. Dalloway* and *A Portrait of the Artist*, we have identified a "Temporal-Moral" divide that previous Formalist readings have largely ignored. Woolf's project emerges as an act of social preservation; by mastering the "tunneling process," she ensures that the human subject remains anchored in a shared, rhythmic humanity. Conversely, Joyce's project is an act of aesthetic liberation; by architecting a "Labyrinth of Language," he allows the individual to escape the "nets" of history and achieve a state of pure, autonomous *stasis*.

The contribution of this paper to the field of Modernist studies lies in its re-alignment of these two giants: Woolf as the architect of a new social solidarity and Joyce as the pioneer of radical, linguistic autonomy. For the international scholarly



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community, these findings suggest that the Modernist novel was never a retreat from reality, but a sophisticated restructuring of it. To read Woolf and Joyce today is to participate in an ongoing negotiation of the self: a choice between the warmth of a shared, fleeting consciousness and the cold, crystalline clarity of the solitary artist. Ultimately, by mastering the "rhythm of the mind," both authors ensured that the human subject—though fragmented—could never be entirely erased by the machinery of the state or the entropy of time.

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