
LIVING FOR THE CITY

The City as a Motif in Modernist Literature

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Word Count: 3854

In this essay I will explore the significance of the city as a motif that runs throughout much of modernist literature and the multifarious and ambivalent ways in which writers respond to it. It is important to establish that modernism does not introduce this focus on the city; conversely, as critics have noted, it has always been a source of fascination and inspiration to writers,¹ and, in some ways, the development of the novel parallels the growth of urbanization so that it is an ideal vehicle for representing the urban experience.² However, it is equally established that modernism is very much an urban movement, it is rooted in 'the complexity and tension of modern metropolitan life, which so deeply underlies modern consciousness and modern writing'³, thus bringing a unique understanding and insight that had not been highlighted before. The scope of this essay is to determine the pioneering ways in which modernist writers began to engage with the city and to explore the different emphasis that they placed on it.

Modernists felt the need to break from traditional literary forms, to experiment and innovate in order to respond to the monumental changes that were happening across Western civilization at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Scientific and technological advances, political and social unrest, together with the effects of the industrial revolution, ushered in an age of modernity in which everything was questioned and recalibrated. Drawing heavily on influential and newly formed theories of psychoanalysis, identity, gender roles, and the concept of time and space, writers were beginning to explore ways in which they could encapsulate this new way of thinking and the ways in which they engage with the motif of the city

¹ See Williams, Raymond, *The City and the Country* (Vintage: London, 2016), in which Williams notes that the contrast between the country and the city can be traced back to classical times.

² Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Cities of Modernism' in *Modernism*, ed. By Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1978), p.97.

³ Ibid, p. 96.

allows them to do this. Thus, it was a period of artistic urgency in which writers could be said to be responding to Ezra Pound's exhortation 'to make it new'.⁴

In this essay I will consider *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad, and *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf as these texts illustrate the contradictory responses to the city in modernist literature. On the one hand there is a negative reaction in terms of alienation, fragmentation, and disconnection but there is also scope for a sense of thrill, freedom, and opportunity; at times, there is a sense of blurring in that the sense of anonymity that the city affords suggests both alienation and liberation. Charles Baudelaire captured this ambivalence in his image of 'multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet'⁵, highlighting the opportunity for writers to exploit this paradox in their exploration of the modernist condition. Thus, it is this aspect that heralds the shift of emphasis in the modernist focus on the city, enabling a writer to explore the psychological depth of character and develop an experimental representation of consciousness.

As Raymond Williams establishes, by the end of the nineteenth century, England had witnessed a significant change in terms of population distribution, for the first time there was a shift from an agricultural to an urban demographic, resulting in a newfound anxiety.⁶ On one level, this shift engendered a fear of the crowd and mob behaviour amongst the ruling classes together with concern regarding the mixing of social classes and the breakdown of social order. There was apprehension over a threat to the human condition itself, that the growth in urbanisation would bring about a negative, psychological change. In his powerful polemic, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich Engels comments on the dehumanising effects of industrialisation, and the alienation and loss of identity brought about by the urban experience,

⁴ The phrase 'make it new' was a modernist imperative coined by Ezra Pound, he also used it for the title of a collection of essays published in 1934.

⁵ Baudelaire, Charles, *Crowds*, <https://allpoetry.com/Crowds>.

⁶ Williams, *The City and the Country*.

The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels ... the brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space.⁷

In his early poem, *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, Eliot introduces the concept of disconnection from the self through Prufrock's inability to express himself properly, to find the right words which is illustrated by the repetition of the lines,

... 'That is not what I meant at all.

That is not it, at all.'⁸

There is a sense of uncertainty and indecision running throughout the poem, all is in flux, as is made evident by the following lines,

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.⁹

Eliot builds on this in *The Waste Land*, locating this sense of disconnection and fragmentation in the motif of the city. In the fourth stanza of *The Burial of the Dead*, Eliot develops the concept of death in life by focusing on London as an 'unreal city'¹⁰, heavily populated by the war dead walking over London Bridge with no real sense of awareness of either themselves or their surroundings; thus, the city acts as a powerful and influential metaphor for an alienated human consciousness. Once more, language, meaning and making oneself understood is problematic, there is an overriding sense of discord, reinforced by an abundance of voices and snippets of conversation. Eliot skilfully conveys a sense of disorder, lack of purpose and direction and, in this way, uses the city to directly comment on the modern sensibility. The way in which Eliot juxtaposes different literary styles and references throughout the poem underlines an anxiety surrounding cultural despair, most effectively illustrated

⁷ Engels, Friedrich, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2009), pp. 68-69.

⁸ Eliot, T. S., 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1961), p.14.

⁹ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁰ Eliot T. S., 'The Waste Land', in *Selected Poems*, p. 53, l.60.

in *A Game of Chess* which seamlessly switches from classical references to the immediacy of a public house and the concerns of ordinary people. Eliot further reinforces this in *The Fire Sermon*, using the classical figure of Tiresias to comment on the vacuity and hollowness of modernity, located in the urban experience; the tone shifts constantly between a high and low register, the classical tone of the poem is undermined by a sense of degradation and vulgarity. For instance, the way in which Eliot depicts the domestic life of the typist conveys a sense of isolation and emptiness, reinforcing the idea that the urban experience is without value,

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.¹¹

His depiction of the later sexual encounter is equally barren, it is merely an automated act overlaid with a sense of boredom and indifference,

‘Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over’.¹²

In this way Eliot establishes that the chance encounter, the randomness that city living affords is an essentially negative and problematic experience. Thus, *The Waste Land* offers the reader a glimpse of an apocalyptic vision of modernity, with London being aligned with other fallen cities; the overriding message that the poem conveys is one of disconnection, underlined by the line

I can connect
Nothing with nothing.¹³

Between 1831 and 1925, London was the largest city in the world, seemingly the centre of enlightenment and culture from which the might of the empire spread outwards, civilising the rest of the world, and, as such, provides a useful location for much modernist literature. Conrad uses

¹¹ Eliot T. S., ‘The Waste Land’, p. 59, ll.222-23.

¹² Ibid., p.60, l.252.

¹³ Ibid., p.62, ll.301-2.

London as the setting for his novel, *The Secret Agent*,¹⁴ in which a group of anarchists plot to blow up the Greenwich Observatory; in effect, targeting the heart of civilisation itself. However, as with *The Waste Land*, the city is a problematic space, it is unstable and in a state of flux, with danger and threat lurking beneath the veneer of respectability and culture. Conrad depicts London both as a labyrinth, its maze-like topography symbolically obscuring the truth behind the terrorist plot and as a place enshrouded by fog, a city of confusion and disorientation. This sense of urban fluidity is further reinforced by Conrad's manipulation of the narrative order in the novel, a literary device that is central to modernist writing which foregrounds the idea that there is no set order, that everything is open to interpretation. Thus, we learn that Stevie, Winnie Verloc's brother, has been killed by the premature detonation of the bomb he is taking to the observatory before the chapter in which he helps his mother move house. Conrad's use of flashback and flash forward at key points in the novel dramatically conveys a sense of uncertainty and unease that underlie the city.

Whereas modernist writers such as Eliot and Conrad often focus on a sense of alienation and disconnection from being immersed in the crowd, thereby, conveying modernity as an assault on the human condition, other writers, such as Virginia Woolf, chose to highlight a more positive aspect of the urban experience, developing the idea that the crowd affords a sense of universal belonging and commonality.

London was important and generous to Virginia Woolf throughout her life, both on a personal and creative level; although she had a problematic and ambivalent relationship with it, at times needing periods of respite, nevertheless, whenever she returned from a period of rural retreat, she imagined it as coming back to the centre of things, the place in which she could find inspiration for her writing. More specifically, it was walking the city streets that held most significance for her, resulting in an abundance of fleeting impressions, the chance encounter, and having the opportunity to observe events and characters; in effect, the act of walking enabled the act of writing. In her essay, *Street*

¹⁴ Conrad, Joseph, *The Secret Agent* (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

Haunting, Woolf discusses that walking is a restorative and reflective process, noting that, 'to walk alone in London is the greatest rest'.¹⁵ She experiences the 'multitude, solitude'¹⁶ that Baudelaire alluded to, allowing for glimpses of other lives and psychological insight which she then utilizes in her writing. Significantly, it introduces the idea that one can find solace in the crowd, that anonymity does not only lead to alienation and disconnection, but that also rather the common humanity one feels is a positive force, however fleeting. Thus, for Woolf, the city underpins and nourishes her creative self and is elemental to her work. This concept is reinforced by Matthew Beaumont who explores the importance of pedestrianism in relation to an understanding of the modernist self, noting that walking is a meaningful activity that has utopian possibilities. Thus, Woolf is illustrative of writers who 'attempt to understand ways in which capitalist modernity both alienates and oppresses people and, conversely, offers them unprecedented opportunities for transcending that alienation or oppression in creative, experimental forms'.¹⁷

In *Mrs Dalloway*, widely regarded as her definitive urban novel, Woolf explores many of the key elements that underpin modernist literature. It is set in London over the course of one day in June, with a set of characters whose lives overlap at key moments. Woolf was frustrated with the traditional narrative form, rejecting the omniscient narrator that had been widely used in much of the realist and naturalist literature of the nineteenth century, developing the interior monologue as a better vehicle to convey the fragmentary experience of modern life. She was heavily influenced by the theory regarding time and consciousness developed by the French philosopher, Henri Bergson¹⁸, which distinguishes between linear (external) time and psychological (inner) time, the latter better reflecting the intensity of experience. In this way, Woolf breaks away from the convention of linear narrative, wanting to express more directly how life is lived. On one level, the narrative is punctuated

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting' in *The Collected Essays of Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2011).

¹⁶ Baudelaire, 'Crowds'.

¹⁷ Beaumont, Matthew, *The Walker: On Finding and Losing Yourself in the Modern City*, (London: Verso, 2020), p. 16.

¹⁸ Childs, Peter, *Modernism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008),

by the chimes of Big Ben marking the hours of the day, which symbolises regulated, conventional and, it could be argued, masculine time adhered to by characters such as Dr. Holmes, Sir William Bradshaw and Hugh Whitbread who represent the rigidity of the patriarchal establishment. On the other hand, Woolf explores a more natural concept of inner time, which Bergson calls 'duration', suggesting that there is a different, more meaningful rhythm that we can respond to. This is illustrated when Peter Walsh draws attention to the bells of St. Margaret's which always chime two minutes later than Big Ben, the implication being that reality is not clear cut but open to interpretation.

In the novel, this experimental concept of time is tied in with Woolf's use of the city, in particular the experience of wandering through the streets. As Beaumont establishes, the act of wandering, both physically and psychically, is highly significant and had been a preoccupation for theorists such as Georg Simmel in terms of how one can navigate and survive the demands of urban life.¹⁹ As noted earlier, the crowd that walks over London Bridge in *The Waste Land* symbolise the alienated self, trapped as they are by their repetitive and regulated steps and, thus, denied any creative impulse or spiritual insight. In contrast, at the opening of *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa's motivation in leaving the house is merely to buy flowers for her party to be held that evening but the very act of walking and being immersed in the city immediately draws her back to memories of her younger self; she has a moment of insight, an epiphany, thinking 'did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her ... that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived.'²⁰ Thus, the journey through the city streets is also a psychological journey into the self, a questioning of identity and the notion of existence itself.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, the reader moves from one character to another via their inner thoughts, there is no overt signification to indicate this; instead, Woolf uses key moments at several points in the novel

¹⁹ Beaumont, *The Walker*.

²⁰ Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs Dalloway*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.9.

as a connecting literary device. For instance, the episode involving the car which is possibly taking a member of royalty from Bond Street back to Buckingham Palace introduces the concept of shared experience as different characters speculate on who the important person could be. It is at this point which the focus shifts from Clarissa to Septimus Smith, setting an important plot development for the novel as a whole, the idea that, although they never actually meet, these seminal characters are interconnected. A further example is provided by the sign writing airplane which develops the idea of universal experience, 'All down the Mall people were standing and looking up into the sky. As they looked the whole world became perfectly silent.'²¹

This connects to what Woolf notes in *Street Haunting*, namely, being part of a crowd brings the possibility of losing one's individuality but in a positive way, to feel part of something bigger and universal, amidst the anonymity of the city. Thus, she subverts the idea that such anonymity is necessarily negative, that, conversely, there is a chance of common feeling and bonding, however momentary. It is the randomness, the chance encounter, of the urban setting that allows this to happen, enabling us to flit from thought to thought, with no governing principle or sense of order to our consciousness. As Susan M. Squier notes, Woolf explores the idea that the street is a crossroads, a point of intersection, which allows for the development of the self, challenging and disrupting the status quo which in turn leads to regeneration and psychic growth.²²

Woolf explores the concept that urban living can afford a sense of thrill and opportunity throughout her work, often making the distinction between the private and public self. In *Street Haunting*, she likens the public self to the putting on of a costume, 'As we step out of the house ... we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room.'²³ This provides a sharp contrast to the sense of alienation and disconnection evidently felt by Eliot; instead of despair, Woolf focuses

²¹ Ibid, p. 22.

²² Squier, Susan M., *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

²³ Woolf, 'Street Haunting', p. 37.

clearly on the idea that urban anonymity can be liberating, that merging with the crowd is a restorative experience.

Modernism is often seen as resting on a threshold, simultaneously looking backwards and forwards, as noted by Peter Childs, 'modernity is both the culmination of the past and the harbinger of the future, pinpointing a moment of potential breakdown in socio-cultural relations and aesthetic representation'.²⁴ In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf explores this transition through the perspective of generational difference and the questioning of gender roles, signified by the different ways in which the characters of Clarissa and her daughter, Elizabeth, navigate and respond to the city. Clarissa is a complex figure in that although she displays an awareness of her inner self and at times questions her identity, lamenting on missed opportunities, she ultimately accepts her role as defined by patriarchal society, 'She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible: unseen; unknown ... this being Mrs Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway'²⁵. Essentially, Clarissa is defined in relation to her husband, she has no separate identity. This is sharply contrasted with Elizabeth who rejects the role that patriarchy has determined for her, one feels that she will write her own destiny; she has a sense of propriety and authority, illustrated by the way in which she boards the London bus and that, unlike Clarissa, she has agency. As Squier notes, Woolf uses the different areas of London to great effect, assigning Clarissa to Westminster and Bond Street, symbolic of her role of political wife and society hostess, whilst Elizabeth ventures into the Strand, an area becoming open to both male and female occupancy, which allows her to contemplate the array of professions that lay open to her in post-war London, ones which had been denied to earlier generations of women. Thus, by contrasting the ways in which these two characters respond to the city, Woolf explores how the sense of self is being restructured.

²⁴ Childs, Peter, *Modernism*, p.17.

²⁵ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.11.

For this novel Woolf draws on the influence of Baudelaire and his figure of the flâneur, a 'person who strolls aimlessly in the modern city, observing people and events ... whose experience epitomizes the fragmented and anonymous nature of life in the modern city'.²⁶ There has been much critical discussion regarding both the fact that the flâneur is a male construct and that the city is a male space.²⁷ Woolf is one of the most important writers from the modernist period who appropriated this trope in order to challenge the notion of male privilege and, in *Mrs Dalloway*, one of the ways she does this is through the character of Peter Walsh.

Having his choice of streets and the array of avenues to walk along, and by presenting himself as an adventurer and observer, he is seemingly the archetypal flâneur, but Woolf undermines this by portraying him as essentially lost; thus, he cannot keep up with the marching soldiers, he is out of step with them, and hence with the times. He catches a glimpse of a young girl who he follows through the streets, in his mind she is possibly a streetwalker, thereby sexually available. Thus, Walsh appears to be in control; clearly, he has authority, merely acting out his male privilege. Conversely, the girl's presence on the street is less defined and legitimate, and her position is vulnerable. Woolf is clearly referencing the Contagious Diseases Act (1864) which was passed to tackle the rise in venereal disease, but which effectively allowed male authorities to both challenge the presence of women on the streets and to abuse them at will.²⁸ The scene in which Walsh walks through London is seminal to the novel and his character allows Woolf to both critique the notion of male ownership and question its continuation, that by depicting Walsh as both proprietorial and lost she is challenging his future. Thus, she counters him with the figure of the young woman; it is not clear to the reader whether she is being pursued by Walsh or if she herself is leading the way. Woolf implies

²⁶ Janet Wolff, 'Gender and the haunting of Cities', in *The Invisible Flâneuse?*, ed. by Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp.18-19.

²⁷ An indepth discussion of the emergence of the flâneuse is beyond the scope of this essay; see Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, eds., *The Invisible Flâneuse?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006) and Elkin, Lauren, *Flâneuse* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016).

²⁸ Mathers, Helen, *Josephine Butler: Patron Saint of Prostitutes* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014).

that the authority of the male gaze is under threat because as she enters her dwelling, she becomes the one in command of the situation and she wrongfoots him, thereby taking away his authority,

now, the great moment was approaching, for now she had slackened, opened her bag, and with one look in his direction, but not at him, one look that bade farewell, summed up the whole situation and dismissed it triumphantly, for ever, had fitted her key, opened the door, and gone!²⁹

However, the fact that Walsh quickly dismisses the slight, thinking of it as mere amusement and fancy, underlines the fact that disrupting the accepted order is problematic.

Mrs Dalloway is populated by a host of individual but interconnected characters whose innermost thoughts we hear, sometimes fleetingly, as with the mother who is thinking of the son she lost in the war whilst attending a village fete, and others more deeply. The way in which she moves from character to character could be suggestive of rootlessness, indicating the anxiety inducing experience of urbanization. However, I think that Woolf presents the totality of the urban experience in all its complexities and contradictions. She shows both the thrill and alienation, perhaps most movingly through the character of Septimus Smith, the other seminal character in this novel. The hallucinatory ramble that Smith takes through London with his wife, Rezia, illustrates that he cannot move beyond his wartime experience, particularly his witnessing of the death of Evans, a fellow soldier. Although he kills himself as he can no longer find meaning in living his life, he ultimately finds the positive, reinforcing the ambivalence, 'But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun was hot.'³⁰ This suggests that a sense of disconnection and alienation is necessary if we are to achieve self-understanding; ironically Smith can only grasp this at the point of death.

In *The Waste Land* and *The Secret Agent*, both Eliot and Conrad respectively capture the alienating and disorienting essence of modernity located in the urban experience. However, I think that Woolf is the more engaging writer in that she is progressive and imaginative, proposing a new concept of the self, engaging with contemporaneous theories in innovative and experimental ways in order to

²⁹ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

dismantle accepted and traditional roles and to disrupt the status quo. The way in which she constructs the novel of *Mrs Dalloway* with a host of interconnecting characters over the course of one day allows her to explore themes such as the public vs the private self and class and gender roles. Furthermore, she fully embraces the fragmentation and randomness of the urban experience and, as Beaumont notes, she finds a way in which to not only reconcile the contradictions but also how to transcend them. Ultimately, she explores a way in which to move forward, to navigate and negotiate a different way of living, thus, recognizing the utopian possibilities that the urban experience offers.³¹

This is neatly illustrated by Walsh at the end of the novel when he is contemplating his thoughts about both Clarissa and life itself, 'What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was.'³²

³¹ Beaumont, *The Walker*.

³² Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.213.