

# Balance between Industrialization and Nature in Mrs. Dalloway from the Perspective of Auditory Narrative

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## Abstract

**This paper focuses on auditory narrative to explore how different sounds affect the main character in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Using a qualitative analysis approach, the study examines the industrial, natural, and man-made soundscapes in the novel. Living in modern London, Mrs. Dalloway experiences life through a mix of these sounds. By analyzing these soundscapes, the study reveals her loneliness in an industrial society, her longing for nature, and her efforts to balance industrialization with nature. This analysis also provides a framework for understanding how individuals today can navigate the sense of alienation that comes with living in an industrialized world.**

## Keywords

**Mrs. Dalloway; Auditory narrative; Alienation; Industrialization; Nature.**

## 1. Introduction

"A pistol shot in the street outside" (Woolf 10). The opening scene from Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* depicts the sound of gunfire actually being the sound of a car. It breaks Mrs. Dalloway's reverie, urging her to prepare for an upper-class social event. In the text, industrial and natural sounds become parts of the scene of London life. Based on the theory of soundscapes and auditory sensation, this study shows how the auditory narrative reflects her anxiety about industrialized society, her yearning for nature, and her quest for a balance between them, which implies the modern individual's feelings in the modern rhythm.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Auditory narrative refers to the expressions and descriptions related to auditory perception within a narrative work. This concept is broader than "sound narrative" because it includes both sounds and the perception of those sounds, as well as the significant role of silence. Silence can evoke auditory responses, creating impactful moments in a narrative where the absence of sound can be as meaningful as its presence. Raymond Murray Schafer introduced the soundscape theory in his book *The Tuning of the World*, defining three key concepts: keynotes, sound signals, and soundmarks. Keynotes refer to background sounds, while sound signals are foreground sounds intended to capture attention. Soundmarks are sounds that hold particular significance to a community, similar to landmarks.

Environmental changes lead to changes in perception. Schafer also distinguishes between hi-fi and lo-fi soundscapes. A hi-fi soundscape is characterized by clear auditory perspectives with distinct foreground and background sounds that overlap less frequently. In contrast, a lo-fi soundscape masks meaningful sounds, reducing an individual's "aural space" and isolating the listener from their environment. In such environments, individuals may no longer hear the sounds of their own movement or speech, effectively shrinking their auditory space.

This study will apply Schafer's soundscape theory to analyze the auditory narrative in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. By examining how industrial and natural sounds, as well as silence, affect

the protagonist, this research aims to understand the broader implications of human alienation in an industrialized society.

### 3. Literature Review

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, known for stream of consciousness, has garnered significant scholarly attention, explored through various critical perspectives including feminism, new historicism, psychoanalysis, and narratology.

Feminist scholars have examined not only themes of female independence but also the oppression of women in a modern societal context. Clarissa Dalloway, as a social entity, struggles to establish a stable and unified subjectivity within a male-dominated world, highlighting the challenges women face in achieving agency and identity (Montashery 10). The text exposes the pervasive oppression within a patriarchal society (Zhang and Guo 82). From a new historicist perspective, the novel is analyzed as a narrative reflecting colonial tensions and contradictions. Walsh's portrayal as an Anglo-Indian figure reveals the complexities and conflicts in colonial discourses, illustrating how the psyche of the colonizer is shaped by imperialist policies and roles (Salameh IV). This narrative also suggests broader historical implications, particularly in its portrayal of post-World War I British Empire ideologies. Psychoanalytic interpretations study Woolf's exploration of existential themes and Freudian concepts such as Thanatos, the death instinct. Li suggests that Woolf incorporates her own interpretation of Thanatos into the novel, exploring themes of mortality and the pervasive influence of modern power dynamics through illness and individual autonomy (Li 115). Woolf critiques the mechanization of individuals by modern scientific standards, such as medicine, which alienates them from their personal volition and uniqueness (Long 107). Xu further explores the function of sound in *Mrs. Dalloway*, arguing that it serves not only to create a modern urban ambiance but also influences characters' perceptions of modernity itself. While previous studies have extensively analyzed disease narratives within the novel, the exploration of auditory narratives remains a burgeoning field.

Therefore, while some studies utilize auditory narrative to examine how modernization impacts individuals, few address why narrative sounds specifically influence Mrs. Dalloway's complex relationship with modern society. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing three distinct soundscapes within the novel to elucidate Mrs. Dalloway's sense of alienation within modernity and her yearning for a connection with nature, thus bridging the divide between industrialization and natural environments.

### 4. Industrial Sound and the Alienation of Mrs. Dalloway

Industrialization marks the transition from traditional agricultural societies to modern industrialized societies, accelerated by agricultural reforms and technological advancements (Liu 78). However, despite serving as a crucial economic catalyst, the British agricultural sector faced severe exploitation, leading to the dominance of industrial civilization over its agrarian counterpart (Liu 78). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, industrialization manifests through innovations in transportation and the corresponding soundscape. These sounds not only evoke the anxiety and loneliness experienced by Mrs. Dalloway but also illustrate a pervasive sense of alienation among people in a rapidly changing society.

#### 4.1. Anxiety in Modern Society

The sound of cars passing and honking exerts an invisible pressure on Mrs. Dalloway and others, highlighting the anxiety induced by the fast-paced life in modern society. These industrial sounds are key components of the sound signals within the broader soundscape framework. Raymond Murray Schafer conceptualized the soundscape as the auditory environment,

encompassing both physical and abstract environments used in music composition and tape editing. Foreground sounds, designed to capture attention, are categorized as "sound signals." At the turn of the 20th century, London, as the capital of the British Empire, was experiencing the final stages of the Industrial Revolution. The city's rapid expansion transformed it into one of the largest metropolises globally, characterized by electrification and extensive transportation systems that underscored its industrial dynamism. Mrs. Dalloway, living amidst this bustling environment, felt pressured to keep pace, experiencing profound anxiety while simultaneously yearning for tranquility.

Since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, many unique soundscapes have been overwhelmed or erased by the pervasive and homogenized noise of contemporary city life, characterized by the constant hum of traffic (Wrightson 10). In Mrs. Dalloway, the description "A pistol shot in the street outside" reveals how a car backfiring mimicked a gunshot, its sound dispersing from the engine to reach Mrs. Dalloway and those around her (Woolf 10). Moments before this disruptive noise, Mrs. Dalloway had been peacefully in a flower shop. However, the sudden sound shattered her reverie, prompting her realization that she needed to return home to prepare for a party. Moreover, the aftermath of the car's noise is depicted in the passage "rumours were at once in circulation," showing how the impact lingers even after the vehicle has departed. This demonstrates the enduring influence of industrialization, akin to "a cloud's sudden sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly" (Woolf 10). The pervasive noise generated by the motor vehicle industry has become an omnipresent aspect of modern life, dominating the auditory senses of the populace.

#### 4.2. Isolation in Modern Society

The sound of airplanes echoing in the high skies, as if distant from the noise on the ground, represents the distance between the countryside and Mrs. Dalloway's isolation. In the Industrial Revolution, the noise of machinery became so prevalent that it drowned out all other natural sounds. The sounds of crowding and the expansion of noise degraded the soundscape from high-fidelity to low-fidelity (Fu 59). Murray Schafer postulates that the soundscape of agrarian societies was characterized by a high-frequency state, with minimal environmental noise, which enabled individuals to perceive and differentiate various sounds with greater clarity (Fu 59). He defines a hi-fi soundscape as an environment where the frequency of sound overlap is reduced, resulting in a greater sense of perspective, with the foreground and background becoming more distinct (Wrightson 11). As a product of industrialization, the airplane, was in a hi-f state, overpowering the natural sounds of Bourton, which means humanity's conquest and control over nature. Nevertheless, this conquest does not make people closer to the nature, but rather in a deeper sense of alienation and loneliness. According to Marx, alienation can be understood as the estrangement of the individual from themselves, from others, and from the world around them. The barter economy alienates the individual, splitting the self into two opposing and contradictory parts. As a result, the individual becomes a unity of opposites and contradictions (Feng 160). Mrs Dalloway can only spend money in buying flowers, building a relationship with the flower shop owner through money.

The soundscapes of an airplane represent a high-fidelity state, a product of modern technology. They mean the social transformations brought about by industrialization and technological advancement. In the early 20th century, although the airplane was still relatively novel and convenient in terms of modernization, this technological progress also brought new challenges including noise and isolation

"The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd" symbolizes the ubiquitous influence, which "was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind" thus forming the separation between humans and modern society (Woolf 15). People can only look up at it, listen to it, but they don't know "whatever it did, wherever it went", which implies

a fear of industrialization (Woolf 15). As the text implies, people can only passively accept the noise and pollution like “behind it a thick ruffled bar of white smoke which curled” brought by this industrialization (Woolf 15). The relationship becomes a monetary transaction, and the individual is alienated due to the industrialization. In contemporary society, it is difficult to identify a purpose or a sense of belonging, which results in feelings of isolation and uncertainty. When hearing the sound of “curving up and up, straight up, like something mounting in ecstasy” she asked the maid, “what are they looking at ?” (Woolf 21). It shows she was indifferent to industrialization. Despite her location in the bustling metropolis of London and her engagement in a multitude of activities, she experienced a sense of isolation. Upon hearing the sound of an airplane, she became acutely aware of the vast distance between herself and the surrounding world, both physically and psychologically. It seems that Clarissa appeared to have a steady life and a regular social circle, but she was actually quite lonely.

## 5. Natural Sound and Yearn for the Nature of Mrs. Dalloway

In Mrs. Dalloway, natural sounds like waves and bird songs evoke Mrs. Dalloway’s longing for the natural world in modern London.

### 5.1. Consolation from the Sound of Waves

As Britain underwent the process of industrialization, several ecological puzzles were encountered. The plight of animals, the destruction of forests and the eradication of plants with no practical use were all subjects of growing concern (Zhang 84). Mrs. Dalloway experiences a sense of comfort and gains the support from nature when she hears the sound of the waves, which provides a sense of relief from her anxiety and confusion. This feeling of being in nature allows her to escape the pressures of city life. The sound of the waves, in contrast to the bustle of city life, alluded to her longing for tranquility and a more natural way of living, which is the serenity and eternity of nature. This sound implies her yearning for nature and her inner desire for a peaceful life seeking to find inner peace through the power of nature.

Natural soundscapes often exist in the form of backgrounds, blending with social soundscapes to create a scene where humans coexist harmoniously with nature (Luo and Deng 8). “Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses, she seemed, having that gift still” shows Clarissa recalled the time she spent by the sea in her youth, where the sound of the waves brought her peace and comfort (Woolf 127). Given her aversion to the hustle and bustle of modern life in London and her desire to return to a simple and natural state of being, the sound of the waves represents a natural state untainted by modern civilization. Consequently, she hopes to escape the pressures and constraints of city life by living in harmony with nature.

Like “murmuring to her laid on shore like flying flowers over some tomb” shows that faced with various challenges and stresses in life, she finds solace in the natural sound of waves (Woolf 110). Comparing herself to flowers, she feels the freedom for she can fly with her heart and the sound of the waves is an eternal presence for its continuity and stability, giving her a sense of reassurance.

### 5.2. Aspiration for Nature and Inner Peace

The bird’s chirping makes her feel the charm of nature and the beauty of life, prompting her to pay attention to inner needs and true feelings. She begins to contemplate how to maintain her inner peace in modern society because she has the longing not only for the love of the natural environment but also for inner peace and freedom.

The song of birds is the tranquility and harmony of nature as implied by “through the waves came the voices of birds singing” (Woolf 105). The auditory phenomenon of birdsong is evocative of the fresh morning air and tranquil forests that are the antithesis of the industrial noise-filled environment of Clarissa in London. Upon hearing the bird’s chirping, Clarissa

experiences a sense of inner peace and tranquility that differs from the sound of the city. What's more, "she was like a bird sheltering under the thin hollow of a leaf" shows this sentiment of comparing herself to the bird motivates her to seek a closer connection with nature, as birds symbolize the splendor of nature and the vigor of life (Woolf 48). The birds can fly freely and sing, captivating her not only visually but also deeply touching her in terms of hearing but Mrs. Dalloway is unable to achieve this.

The sounds of waves and birdsong in Mrs. Dalloway not only create natural soundscapes, but also signify the power struggle between nature and industrialization. These natural sounds illustrate Mrs. Dalloway's inner conflict and her desire to reconcile the opposing forces of industrialization and the natural world.

## **6. Mrs. Dalloway's Attempt to Balance Industrialization and Nature**

The opening of doors and windows represents a man-made soundscape in this way Mrs. Dalloway attempts to breach the boundary between nature and industrialization.

### **6.1. Blur of Boundary between Industrialization and Nature**

With the expansion of cities and the development of industry, people prefer for rural environment. People are perpetually in a state of contradiction and confusion, yet they are also acutely aware of the opposition between tradition and civilization and the opposition between the countryside and industry. It can be seen that the urbanization of Britain is constantly colliding with people's traditional rural feelings. The combination of garden cities and green meadows is the way to go (Zhang 81). The soundscapes of opening doors and windows indicate Mrs. Dalloway's effort to break the confines of modern industrialized life and reestablish a connection with nature. Doors and windows separate her private space from the outside, and the act of opening them breaks this isolation, connecting her life with the external natural and social environment. This is not only a physical space, but also a psychological space where Mrs. Dalloway yearns to pursue her inner peace.

"With a little squeak of the hinges", Mrs. Dalloway had opened the French windows and entered Bourton's open air. For her, this air is "how fresh, how calm, stiller than this, of course" (Woolf 3). It makes her feel like she was "in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave" (Woolf 3). When she opens doors, she allows fresh air to enter the room. This fresh air is part of nature, while her home is in industrialization and the upper-class society, which demonstrates Clarissa holds a contradictory attitude towards industrialized life. While she enjoys the convenience and social activities that city life brings, she also feels constrained and oppressed by it. The sound of opening doors and windows is a reflection of her internal conflict regarding the contradiction between her desire to enjoy modern life and her aspiration to experience nature and tranquility. She attempts to let the freshness of nature purify the pollution of industrialized society, just like a little squeak of the hinges suggests that she is trying to connect industrialization and nature.

### **6.2. Balance between Industrialization and Nature**

In her attempt to achieve a state of balance, Mrs. Dalloway utilizes the auditory stimuli of opening doors and windows to establish a connection with the natural world, despite the demands of contemporary society. This pursuit of fulfillment is evident in her desire to integrate nature into her life and she aspires to integrate nature into her life to alleviate the oppression inherent in industrialization.

Natural creatures like sheep are rare in London's modern cityscape. When Mrs. Dalloway opens her door, she encounters a "great shaggy dog" chasing sheep, which brings her joy (Woolf 44). Through these moments, she connects her current life with memories of nature, striving to balance industrialization with her appreciation for the natural world. Opening doors and

windows serves as Mrs. Dalloway's way of resisting industrialization and embracing nature. She seeks to harmonize these aspects of her life, finding peace and fulfillment amidst the hustle and bustle of city living.

## 7. Conclusion

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf explores women's lives and the significant impact of industrialization on nature. The study contrasts the loud noises of city life—like cars and airplanes—with the calm Mrs. Dalloway finds in natural sounds such as waves and birdsong. This contrast highlights her anxiety and loneliness in the busy city, prompting her quest to find harmony between industrialization and nature by opening doors and windows to connect these two worlds. Using theories of auditory storytelling and sound environments, this paper examines Mrs. Dalloway's emotional journey amidst urban and natural sounds, and her effort to reconcile these opposing forces. This journey serves as a metaphor for modern individuals facing the challenges of rapid modernization. Moving from the visual to the auditory realm, different sounds evoke tranquility and introspection within Mrs. Dalloway. The contrast between natural and industrial sounds reveals a deeper societal divide.

In today's world, the constant presence of industrial noises often reduces appreciation for natural sounds, pushing people to seek balance. Mrs. Dalloway's story resonates as a timeless exploration of human connection to both city life and the natural world, offering insights into navigating the complexities of contemporary existence.

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