

**Flowered Spaces: Gendered Existential Alienation in *Mrs. Dalloway*
by Virginia Woolf and “Odour of Chrysanthemums” by D.H.
Lawrence**



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03/09/2025 (Summer 2025)

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“Odour of Chrysanthemums” by D.H. Lawrence**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Humanities
University of Liberal Arts, Bangladesh

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
BA in English

Anika Labiba Ahmed

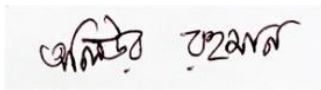
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Date of Submission: 03/09/2025 (Summer 2025)

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light yellow rectangular background. The signature is stylized and appears to read 'Anika Labiba Ahmed'.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores early 20th-century modernist literature in how it depicts women's existential alienation through analysing Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and D.H. Lawrence's short story "Odour of Chrysanthemums" (1911). Employing Jean-Paul Sartre's concepts of freedom, authenticity, and bad faith and Simone de Beauvoir's ideas of woman-as-Other, and immanence vs transcendence, the study asks the questions: How do Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* and D.H. Lawrence in "Odour of Chrysanthemums" depict female protagonists' existential alienation? And how do these depictions reflect or depart from Sartre's and Beauvoir's discussions on existentialism, freedom, and otherness? Its methodology is qualitative, and uses comparative close reading, focusing on narrative perspective, symbolism, temporality, and stylistic writing techniques. Both texts feature women protagonists striving for authenticity despite limitations imposed by patriarchal societies, yet the texts differ in tone and outcome. Combining existential philosophy and feminist literary criticism, this paper suggests that alienation is at once universal and gendered, determined by the responsibility that comes with freedom and by roles prescribed by society. By studying the form, philosophy, and gender in two different modernist forms (Woolf's internal stream-of-consciousness and Lawrence's external realism), this paper provides a comparative Sartrean-Beauvoirean analysis that demonstrates how modernist literature expresses the possibilities and limitations of women's existential freedom.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, modernist literature, gendered alienation, existentialism, feminist literary criticism, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre

Chapter One

Introduction

When faced with the rude awakenings of existential dread, the individual is met with a destabilizing truth: that the world, and life itself, carries no intrinsic meaning and it is up to the individuals to build it for themselves in an indifferent, apathetic universe. When women are concerned, the crisis is complicated even further as the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society and the “myths” of femininity profoundly mold a person's existential experience. This paper discusses the intersection of Existentialism and Feminist Literary Criticism. It investigates how early 20th century modernist literature portrays women's existential alienation. The focus lies on two texts that are contemporaries to each other: Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and D.H. Lawrence's short story “Odour of Chrysanthemums” (1911), and suggests that women's existential alienation in Modernist literature is particularly shaped by gender roles and societal expectations. The two main theorists evoked in this thesis are Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

In this paper, “alienation” is meant in the existentialist sense of the word, i.e., fundamental isolation from society, other individuals, or one's authentic self. Holding Woolf and Lawrence in tandem, the paper demonstrates how existential alienation turns gendered as patriarchal expectations mold the characters' nature and extent of freedom.

As Simone de Beauvoir argues in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, in a patriarchal society, the woman is considered as the “Other” as opposed to the man who is the default and the Absolute (Beauvoir 91). This concept of woman-as-Other imposes a fundamental alienation. The woman is denied her own subjectivity and is estranged because she is perpetually taught to see

herself through the eyes of other people, mainly men. On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism argues that everyone experiences alienation as it is a result of realizing one's own freedom and the absence of an inherent Essence (Sartre 23). According to Sartre, "existence precedes essence" and that not only means that an individual is radically free, but also adds a burden of responsibility that everyone has to create meaning (or Essence) for themselves. However, this freedom is complicated by gender. Women, especially in the early 20th century, are not considered equal to men when it comes to defining her own identity because patriarchal society has already assigned an Essence for them: the wife, the mother, the angel of the house, the monster, an object of beauty- not a complex human being.

The methodology of this study is qualitative in nature, using comparative close-reading, and focusing on narrative perspective, temporality, symbolism, and stylistics. Particular scenes, such as Clarissa's confrontation with the news of Septimus's death and Elizabeth Bates's confrontation with Walter's corpse, are investigated through the lenses of Sartre's bad faith, freedom, and authenticity, and Beauvoir's concepts of immanence, transcendence, and woman-as-Other. These theories, applied side-by-side, demonstrate that women's existential alienation is not just part of the universal existential angst but is also gender-specific.

Both Lawrence and Woolf's protagonists, Elizabeth Bates and Clarissa Dalloway, highlight gendered subjectivity. Clarissa is painfully aware of her identity as a society hostess and Elizabeth's sense of self revolves around her being a coal miner's wife and a mother. Both women characters' sense of self is crafted by societal expectations of femininity. As a result, they are in internal conflict and struggle with these roles.

As a modernist woman writer famous for her stream-of-consciousness style of writing, Woolf plunges into the interiority of Clarissa Dalloway- a middle aged woman whose existential

angst is masked by her domestic and social façade. Meanwhile, Lawrence, a male modernist author, often concerned with primal emotions and gender dynamics, presents to us Elizabeth Bates- a working class woman whose husband's sudden death triggers a profound revelation about the isolation in her own life. In studying the novel and short story comparatively, we find how gendered alienation knows no class nor setting. It is present in both an upper-class London society and a working-class mining town where women characters deal with the dissatisfaction and isolation closely tied to their gender roles. Nevertheless, how Woolf and Lawrence treat these common themes is different in tone and resolution of the plot, showing us their differing perspectives and may hint at their own gendered understanding and experiences of alienation. In Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* there is a subtle critique on social norms, and more fleeting hope for moments of communion or understanding, while Lawrence's story gives us a much darker and bleaker glimpse of what it means to be isolated, with no comfort or escape for the protagonist.

The key terms that permeate this paper include *alienation*- in the existentialist sense of profound isolation or separation from the self or the world, *gendered subjectivity*- the concept that one's identity and consciousness are molded by the impressions of gendered social structures, *phallic pride*- a term by Beauvoir referring to the glorification of male sexual dominance (Beauvoir 271), and *bad faith*- a term by Sartre referring to the self-deception one adopts to escape responsibility and authentic choice in order to meet society's expectations and fulfill prescribed roles (Sartre 55). These concepts will be defined and expanded upon in context throughout this paper. For example, Chapter Four explores Beauvoir's concept of "phallic pride" in Lawrence's writing, and Sartre's "bad faith" is discussed in Chapter Five to shed light on Clarissa and Elizabeth's avoidance of freedom.

This study is based on the two research questions: How do Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* and D.H. Lawrence in “Odour of Chrysanthemums” depict female protagonists’ existential alienation? And how do these depictions reflect or depart from Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s discussions on existentialism, freedom, and otherness? To effectively respond to these questions, this dissertation is organized into three analytical chapters. Chapter Three, titled “The Gendered Subject and the Self” explores how both primary texts depict their female protagonists’ sense of identity against the concept of existential freedom and amidst societal limitations, with reference to Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s fundamental theories. Chapter Four, “Patriarchal Myth and Phallic Authority,” discusses the effects of patriarchal gender myths in the texts, by using Beauvoir’s critique of D.H. Lawrence (and other feminist readings) as a basis for understanding Lawrence’s and Woolf’s treatment of male authority and female objectification. Finally, Chapter Five, “Alienation, Time, and Death,” examines how temporality and mortality heightens the characters’ alienation in relation to Sartrean bad faith and Beauvoir’s immanence and transcendence, reading pivotal scenes in each text against the concepts. The conclusion brings all the findings together and makes suggestions for further research.

This dissertation contributes to the existing scholarship by offering a study that applies a Sartrean-Beauvoiran perspective in two modernist authors of different genders and forms, arguing that alienation is both universal and gendered in nature. By taking gender into account with existential alienation, we get a more nuanced understanding of the inner turmoil of characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Elizabeth Bates, who are not just “universal” existential subjects, nor can they be reduced completely to products of their gendered environments. They are a complex mix between the two. This study hopes to contribute to the ever-emerging scholarship on modernist literature, gender, and philosophy. It emphasises that silence and

speech (or acquiescence and authenticity) in these “flowered spaces” is filled with meaning. Its title evokes not just floral motifs from each text (Clarissa’s flower shop visit and Elizabeth’s chrysanthemums), but also the use of flowers as symbols of domestic femininity and life’s impermanence, and in turn suggests that within these gendered arenas lie profound existential crises.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is qualitative and comparative, based on close reading, using existentialist and feminist theory. The primary texts, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and D.H. Lawrence’s “Odour of Chrysanthemums”, have been chosen as they feature female characters embodying issues of alienation, identity, and social roles. The analysis is grounded in Jean-Paul Sartre’s theories on freedom, bad faith and authenticity as explained in his essay “Existentialism Is a Humanism” and *Being and Nothingness*, together with Simone de Beauvoir’s concepts of feminist existentialism in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir’s chapter on D.H. Lawrence serves as a critical lens and context for evaluating his depiction of women. Close reading is employed, focusing on narrative technique, imagery, and character interiority. The study is organized thematically to carry out comparison between the two texts in terms of how they reflect or subvert existentialist and feminist issues.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This literature review examines existing scholarship on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and D.H. Lawrence's short story "Odour of Chrysanthemums." Some critics of *Mrs. Dalloway* have examined Woolf's critique of strict social stratification and the repression of women's emotions, and others interpret the novel within feminist and performative frameworks, arguing that Clarissa Dalloway's identity is constituted and circumscribed by gendered norms.

Likewise, scholarship on "Odour of Chrysanthemums" by D.H. Lawrence explores Elizabeth Bates's existential awakening that makes her realize the profound isolation of humans, amplified by her station as wife and mother in a working-class industrial setting. There has been discussion of Lawrence's thematic shifts as he went through drafts and his use of gendered scientific metaphors that emphasize the alienation in Elizabeth and Walter's marriage. These studies bring to light a common modernist concern with alienation and the otherness in their own ways.

Mrs. Dalloway:

In "Mrs. Dalloway and the Social System," Alex Zwerdling offers a critical lens through which one can understand how Virginia Woolf critiques the English social hierarchy and its influence on individual subjectivity. Zwerdling argues against the impression of Woolf as entirely a "poetic" author and highlights her work instead as a social critic and satirist who "wanted to criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (Zwerdling 69). Building on Zwerdling, this dissertation interprets the novel's ever-present timekeeping (Big Ben's "leaden circles") as a device that forces Clarissa into Sartrean bad faith, at the same time, contrasts with Clarissa's fleeting moments of Beauvoiran transcendence, making them stand

out. Clarissa Dalloway's station as the quintessential English hostess symbolizes the emotional repression characterized by her class—a class that Zwerdling shows to be in favor of “solidity, rigidity, stasis, the inability to communicate feelings” (Zwerdling 71). Building on this critique of societal norms, Gönül Bakay highlights that Woolf's use of silence, repetition, and fluid narrative style symbolizes unstable female subjectivity in language systems that are patriarchal and subtly emphasizes themes of existential alienation (Bakay 142-143). Such stylistic techniques will be used as evidence in close-readings in this dissertation.

Furthermore, Shannon Forbes's “Equating Performance with Identity: The Failure of Clarissa Dalloway's Victorian ‘Self’” claims that Clarissa's existential displacement is rooted in her merging of performance and identity. Read through Sartrean lens, “performance-as-identity” is taken to be a version of bad faith in this dissertation, when analysing scenes such as when Peter Walsh asks Clarissa if she is happy, and Clarissa's retreat from the party on hearing the news of Septimus's death. Forbes argues, “Clarissa tries to equate the performance of this role with her identity, but her attempts... result in emptiness, a lack of fulfillment, and ironically, virtually no self at all” (Forbes 39). In this dissertation, this context is taken up as a formal structure (public time and social gaze) that Clarissa, at times, resists. Emphasizing the instability of identities constructed by repetitive performance, Forbes's reading enriches the understanding of Mrs. Dalloway's exploration of existential alienation and gendered subjectivity in modernist fiction. In the upcoming analysis chapters of this paper, these insights are used to analyse the party's stagedness and Clarissa's private musings, revealing her momentary struggles with authenticity.

In addition, Iraj Montashery's “A Feminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway” explores how Clarissa's identity is molded by society and is unstable in patriarchal structures.

This dissertation adopts Montashery's Beauvoirean framework to read Clarissa's self-denial of her own desires after her illness and her prescribed role as a hostess as limitations upon women, that this paper's analysis contrasts with Clarissa's fleeting moments of transcendence. This creation takes place within a patriarchal language that marginalizes the feminine subject and frustrates Clarissa's desire for a unified self. Montashery underscores Clarissa's acts of feminine resistance in her rejection of Peter Walsh, her queer desire for Sally Seton, and her role as the "perfect hostess." But these acts prove to be fragile and incomplete. Montashery states, "Without her mask, Clarissa is nobody, a woman with no distinct identity" (Montashery 24). This echoes Butler's concept of gender being performative rather than intrinsic, suggesting that Clarissa's identity is a "doing" in process rather than a fixed "being." The paper also highlights Clarissa's body as a cultural text, marked by gendered expectations that she simultaneously defies and fulfills. Her oscillating between moments of agency and alienation encapsulates Woolf's larger challenge to androcentric systems. Montashery's paper concludes by highlighting Clarissa's failure to negotiate her liberation from patriarchal shackles, placing her amid modernist treatments of gendered existential alienation.

Moreover, Shalom Rachman's "Clarissa's Attic: Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway Reconsidered" provides a piercing exploration of Clarissa Dalloway's existential alienation. Rachman contends that Clarissa's authentic self is suppressed and metaphorically locked up in her "attic," a private psychological space where she momentarily faces her profound fears and deepest desires. "In the attic of her house we get a glimpse of the 'attic' in her personality where her true being is locked up" (Rachman 10). Drawing on Rachman's "attic," this dissertation interprets Woolf's vertical structure of consciousness which echoes Clarissa's estrangement. Rachman highlights the novel's treatment of alienation and the price of self-repression and

provides a critical understanding of Clarissa's interiority and Woolf's modernist project on gendered subjectivity.

Finally, in "Beyond Gender: The Example of Mrs. Dalloway," Michael Payne suggests Virginia Woolf's literature, Mrs. Dalloway in particular, transcends gender roles. Payne contends that while Woolf is concerned about women's problems, she rejects the label of a feminist and instead champions an understanding of human life that goes beyond gender. This lens is important in understanding the existential themes in Mrs. Dalloway, where Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith symbolize the turmoil and transcendence of gendered and existential alienation. Payne's study of Woolf's phenomenological approach and her scathing critique of societal conventions enlivens the exploration of modernist treatments of identity and alienation in Mrs. Dalloway. Payne's perspective is set against this dissertation's- the phenomenology resonates universally, at the same time, the novel's form is circumscribed by gender.

Odour of Chrysanthemums

T.H. McCabe in "The Otherness of D.H. Lawrence's 'Odour of Chrysanthemums'" discusses how Lawrence makes the idea of otherness the fundamental truth of relationships. He contends that according to Lawrence, each individual is "intrinsically isolate and single in itself" (McCabe 149) and that Elizabeth Bates's confrontation with her husband's deceased body triggers her existential epiphany. McCabe's ideas are adopted in this dissertation and reframed through a feminist-existential framework. McCabe goes on to highlight how the darkness and touch motifs symbolize Elizabeth's process of understanding otherness. The text constantly obscures vision as a symbol of the inadequacy of intellectual knowledge, but her experience of

Walter's body, by touching him, allows for an intense, if partial, understanding of his individuality.

Building on this exploration of otherness, Keith Cushman in "D.H. Lawrence at Work: The Making of 'Odour of Chrysanthemums'" follows the story through its drafts, noting Lawrence's changing thematic preoccupations. Cushman remarks that in early versions, the focus was on Elizabeth's private grievances and sense of relief at the death of Walter, but in the final Prussian Officer rendition, the story changes to become a deep meditation on isolation in humans. Cushman's diachronic findings are used in this dissertation to conduct a synchronic analysis of the final iteration of the text. Furthermore, Cushman's study provides us with important context that is needed to understand Lawrence's philosophy.

Furthermore, Nora Foster Stovel in "D.H. Lawrence and 'The Dignity of Death'" places "Odour of Chrysanthemums" as part of Lawrence's discussion of death as a catalyst for devastatingly tragic realization and recognition. Stovel highlights how Elizabeth's confrontation with her husband's deceased body forces her to realize "the utter isolation of the human soul" and the alienation that characterized their marriage (Stovel 67). Here, death relieves Walter of his marital and social roles, resulting in him being "apart and utterly alien to her" (Stovel 67). Stovel brings to light how Elizabeth Bates's pride and sternness played a part in their profound estrangement, but her epiphany is too late for any hope of reconciliation. The short story's motif, especially of the "cold, deathly smell" of the chrysanthemums, further highlights death and mortality's role in recognizing human isolation. Stovel's paper strengthens the existential qualities of gendered relationships in Lawrence's works, including "Odour of Chrysanthemums,"

and strengthens this dissertation's argument that Lawrence's realism offers no relief, in contrast to Woolf's resolution.

Additionally, Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion in "The Ethical Chronotope in Modernist Prose: The Example of D.H. Lawrence's 'Odour of Chrysanthemums'" investigates how modernist authors, Lawrence and Woolf, employ temporal and spatial constructs to evoke the protagonists' existential epiphanies. Using Bakhtin's chronotope, Champion argues that the washing room in "Odour of Chrysanthemums" is a "threshold space" in which Elizabeth Bates transitions from industrialized and mechanized temporality to a meditative kind of duration (Champion 42). The threshold enables Elizabeth to understand her husband's otherness and realize "the utter isolation of the human soul" (Champion 198). Although the main focus is Lawrence's short story, Champion also compares it to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, where Clarissa's experiences with the urban environment of London stage similar dramatizations of a struggle between clock-bound, patriarchal time and fleeting moments of self-consciousness. For Clarissa, Big Ben symbolizes the "regulated temporality" of societal structure versus the "private, affective temporality" of when she is alone (Champion 50). The two protagonists dwell in areas where alienation is evident but also briefly interrupted by moments of authenticity. These threshold moments, Champion contends, are cognitive and ethical epiphanies. Champion's paper, thus, broadens the understanding of modernist aesthetics and how it interacts with temporality, ontological otherness, and ethical awareness.

Lastly, Michael Wutz's "The Thermodynamics of Gender: Lawrence, Science and Sexism" explores Lawrence's usage of scientific metaphors that inscribe gender dynamics in his works such as "Odour of Chrysanthemums." In his section on the short story, Wutz highlights

that Elizabeth Bates is characterized as an “energy-absorbing system—cold, self-contained, and destructive of Walter’s vitality” (Wutz 38). This thermodynamic lens subscribes to a gendered binary that favors male energy and demonizes female reserve. Elizabeth Bates’s emotional reservedness is portrayed to be stripping away Walter’s energy, making their union a “closed system whose entropy is inevitable” (Wutz 41). While Wutz argues that Lawrence’s metaphors continue the misogynistic trope, his reading also explains how these metaphors, as embodied, generate the gap between Elizabeth and Walter. Walter’s death ends the “exchange of energies,” and ironically, it is then that Elizabeth is finally able to see the Other in him. Wutz’s paper enriches understanding of modernist intersections of science and the cultural inscription of gendered alienation.

The existing scholarship on *Mrs. Dalloway* and “Odour of Chrysanthemums” focuses on feminist and existential concerns, investigating how conventional gender roles and societal conditioning enable the protagonists’ alienation from others and self. Most studies, however, work with these texts in isolation, highlighting Woolf’s critique of middle-class English society or Lawrence’s working-class reflection on relational alienation. There is not much in the way of comparative study examining Woolf and Lawrence’s different orientations of style and social scrutiny, both of which critique gendered alienation through the modernist form. This paper seeks to redress this knowledge gap and studies *Mrs. Dalloway* and “Odour of Chrysanthemums” in tandem. The study will be based on the premise that both texts reflect and challenge existentialist and feminist theories on the issues of identity, otherness and authenticity.

Chapter Three

The Gendered Subject and the Self

Modernist literature often delves into the clash between internal selves and public personas. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and D.H. Lawrence's "Odour of Chrysanthemums" (1911) presents to us two female protagonists who grapple with practicing the radical freedom that Jean-Paul Sartre deems universally and indiscriminately a human feature when Sartre posits that "existence precedes essence", while simultaneously, being in the position that Simone de Beauvoir calls woman's "Otherness" (Beauvoir 91). Both works exhibit how roles such as that of the wife, mother, or society hostess fall apart when met with death, unveiling the isolation that these social roles perpetuate. In this chapter, key scenes, such as Clarissa's flower run, Elizabeth's ritual cleansing of Walter etc., are read through Sartrean and Beauvoirean lenses, and the form (focalisation, temporality, etc) is analysed as well.

Clarissa Dalloway: performance and repression

Clarissa Dalloway, from *Mrs. Dalloway*, is initially known to us only by her titles of wife to Mr. Dalloway, Elizabeth's mother, and society hostess but as she ventures off to the streets of London to buy flowers herself, she suddenly feels "out, out, far out to sea and alone" (Woolf 8). The echoing of the word "out" points to the discrepancy between her outward refinement and a confidential inwardness. Her flashbacks to summer in Bourton when her friend Sally Seton's kiss "turned the whole world.. upside down" and alluded to a lively and unconventional life ahead (Woolf 52). In choosing to marry Richard who is "safe, kind", holds up her status on the social

ladder and it is a decision that gains respectability, but is also one that echoes Sartrean bad faith- the choice of forgoing authenticity and freedom for a prescribed essence (Sartre 55).

When making arrangements for her party, Clarissa wonders if there are real purposes to these parties- if they foster authentic community. These parties conceal existential anxiety and at the same time create opportunities of communion which could offer redemption of London's triviality. The "leaden circles" (Woolf 4) of Big Ben's patriarchal, imperial time continually remind her that the day doesn't belong to her; it's not hers, yet she is bound by it. Formally, Big Ben's chimes are not just keeping time, but also enacting constraints into the writing itself.

Peter Walsh bluntly asks her "Are you happy, Clarissa?", it disarms her- she deflects the question and the feeling of uncertainty with "Here is my Elizabeth" (Woolf 71). Clarissa is most shattered and exposed upon hearing the news of Septimus Smith's suicide. Retreating to a small room, alone, she likens death to a form of "defiance... an attempt to communicate" (Woolf 184). Septimus's leap into his death contains a truth that polite society would snuff out, reflecting Clarissa's own longing for authenticity. Bringing in Beauvoir, Clarissa's "frigidity" is a result of her acceptance and internalisation of immanence. Read through Sartre, Clarissa embracing the role of the "perfect hostess" is an enactment of her bad faith; it is a role under which she hides her authentic self. Her withdrawal from the openness of the party and into the small room (a threshold space), sets the stage for her to decide to go back to the party- an authentic choice to return to others.

Clarissa's alienation is corporeal as well. After an undisclosed illness, she permits her desires to dissipate, placing abstinence as virtue: not even Clarissa any more but rather "part of people she had never met" (Woolf 12). Settling for frigidity as a natural process of aging, reflects

Beauvoir's concept that the patriarchal myth convinced women to consider self-denial as essence. Even so, her body houses quiet rebellion. When Sally arrives at the party, Clarissa feels a "sudden exhilaration" that awakens the forbidden kiss of their youth (Woolf 176).

Afterwards, it remains open-ended. When she returns to the drawing room, she feels a "great wave" of life; "for there she was" (Woolf 296). This iconic phrase is neither victorious in nature nor is it despair. It indicates a mediated and partial authenticity effected through the social role rather than some sort of direct displacement of that role. At this point of the novel, it points to a possibility of limited transcendence through presence and attention.

Elizabeth Bates: epiphany by the side of a corpse

While Clarissa's turmoil is abstract and stretched over time, Elizabeth Bates's is compact and abrupt. "Odour of Chrysanthemums" is set at dusk in Winter where "The fields were dreary and forsaken, and the tall heaps of slag were still and black" (Lawrence 281). Begrudgingly, Elizabeth waits for her husband who she assumes to be drinking. She waits, goes about the mundane tasks of tidying and scolding. Lawrence does not delve into Elizabeth's interiority in the way Woolf does. The focalisation is external and dialogue minimal, leaving the room's objects to convey message. The very Chrysanthemums that were once a symbol of their courtship, now emanate doom and gloom as she notices the "cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums" (Lawrence 301).

When the miners bring Walter's corpse home, the miner's cottage becomes a mortuary. Elizabeth, quick on her feet, performs her widowly tasks of boiling water, cutting his clothes, and while washing the stiffened limbs, recognizes the stranger in Walter; for "They had met in the dark, and fought in the dark" (Lawrence 308). In death Walter is relieved of the alcoholic

characterization that Elizabeth resented, unveiling an unknowable individual. Touching Walter's inert body, Elizabeth feels "In her womb was ice of fear, because of this separate stranger with whom she had been living as one flesh." (Lawrence 307). She confronts Sartre's radically free Other which had been softened and disguised in habit. The illusion of "living as one flesh" is wholly shattered. The room where Walter is washed functions as a liminal, threshold space where, as opposed to the mechanical factory time, time is slowed down and marked by touch. Contrary to Wutz's argument that Elizabeth is an "energy absorbing system", this scene gives her agency and active realisation.

While Clarissa extracts from her existential climax a profound, consoling insight, for Elizabeth Bates there is no comfort. The "cold, deathly smell of chrysanthemums" reeks throughout the atmosphere, with what Beauvoir would call "immanence", i.e. life consisting solely of repetitive service (Beauvoir 286). Nevertheless, the short story ends in somber clarity and finality: She must live with herself, and the children and the fact that they had been two separate people. The epiphany is devastating, but the recognition is also the very proponent of freedom.

Two cartographies of gendered alienation

Surficially, there are many differences between the two characters. For Clarissa Dalloway has the privilege of moving through parks and parlours, and for Elizabeth Bates, the confinement of a cottage dimly illuminated by candlelight. *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place over the span of a day, while "Odour of Chrysanthemums" is set in the dark of the night. Even so, both texts express how socially constructed essences (be it hostess or a miner's wife) fall apart with death's

encounter. Septimus's leap and Walter's suffocation deconstruct the concept that feminist self-realization is achieved through dutiful performance.

The narrative techniques further sharpen the comparison. Woolf's stream-of-consciousness writing provides Clarissa with ample discursive room to test selves, while in Lawrence's colder and detached narration, Elizabeth remains external until the washing scene plunges her into unadulterated self-awareness. Their differing classes determine the end result: Clarissa has her money to soften the blow, allowing her to extract meaning through London high society. Meanwhile Elizabeth's poverty sharpens the blow but creates space for a potential new lease on life. Woolf's focalisation is mobile and the inclusion of auditory motifs indicate pressure; while Lawrence's chiaroscuro and externally detailed scenes work toward one ritualistic moment.

Both works anticipate a reaction. Clarissa rejoins her party with the belief that even frivolous gatherings can bring "beauty...fun" (Woolf 284). For her, existential authenticity will be in fleeting moments. Elizabeth is left with a void that hints at a sense of autonomy that was previously unheard of: with the eradication of her role as a wife, she may craft for herself a new identity. Beauvoir's transcendence, in both cases, glints on the horizon

Mrs. Dalloway and "Odour of Chrysanthemums" reveal that women's struggle for authenticity is varied. Sartre supplies us with the language of freedom and bad faith, while Beauvoir points at how the terrain is gendered before any choice is made. Woolf creates a protagonist who extracts transitory authenticity from performance, and Lawrence depicts a protagonist who, via a shocking confrontation with death, gains that acknowledgement, even if

agonising, as her first leap into freedom. In both cases, the form themselves act out gendered alienation.

Chapter Four

Patriarchal Myth and Phallic Authority

Modernist literature often highlights gender as an arena where existential freedom conflicts with inherited myth. This chapter uses Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "phallic pride" to analyse D.H. Lawrence's "Odour of Chrysanthemums," and compares it to Virginia Woolf's deconstruction of male authority in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Although Beauvoir penned her critique of Lawrence in 1949, her representation of masculinity as the "phallic bridge to the future" has a lasting legacy today when it comes to discourse about gender roles, modern masculinity, and male literary legacy.

Beauvoir's "Phallic Pride"

Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, contends that Lawrence upholds male sexual authority, considering marriage as a rite in which a woman attains self-actualization only by "yielding to the sacred fire of the male" (271-75). Man enjoys and embodies transcendence, i.e. autonomous action, whereas woman is chained to immanence- "nurturing soil" for male fulfillment (275). The miner Walter Bates is given the luxury and the licensed freedom to spend his earnings on drink, when his wife Elizabeth maintains the home, enclosed within the four walls of domesticity. This is an example of what Beauvoir terms the "double bondage" of reproductive and emotional work (274).

As the story opens, we find Elizabeth walking about in her kitchen at sundown, anticipating Walter's return from work. All of her chores including tidying the children, serving

tea to her father, fulfills a gendered order. When Elizabeth passes the pub, she retorts to herself “He was merely drinking over there at the “Prince of Wales” (Lawrence 298). Her argument does little against a society that values male pleasure but normalises female submission.

Lawrence cements his critique with Walter’s return to the cottage not inebriated but dead, suffocated in the mine where the black shaft symbolizes the phallic industry at its most self-destructive (255). The myth of the man as a life-giving, creative force falls apart, unable to conquer mortality.

Walter’s freedom as prescribed by society directly results in Elizabeth’s emotional confinement. At the same time, Lawrence makes this disparity feel wrong to the readers, revealing his own philosophy about this dynamic. This bleak conclusion provides no other counter-narrative: Elizabeth gains insight but not power, left "to live with herself, and the children, and the fact that they had been two separate people" (Lawrence 262). Patriarchy is revealed but not replaced; the story ends in sad stasis and unrest.

Woolf’s Counter-Myth: Private Rebellion in *Mrs. Dalloway*

Woolf moves the struggle from slag heaps to Westminster, but patriarchal authority persists in Sir William Bradshaw, the coveted psychiatrist who preaches ‘Proportion’, and condemns any mind that oversteps the limits imposed on it by divergence to exile within institutions (150). Mrs. Dalloway feels the magnitude of the power which enabled Septimus Warren Smith to proclaim his freedom from Bradshaw by launching himself to death. Clarissa calls it a "...defiance, Death was an attempt to communicate" (Woolf 280). Suicide here is a resistance to a system that would banish individual consciousness for social purpose.

Woolf's stream-of-consciousness mode of narration allows for Clarissa to be granted the complexity and layered subjectivity which usually male protagonists in literature have the privilege of occupying. Through mirroring Clarissa's daydreaming with Septimus's hallucinations, Woolf maintains that interiority (not social standing) defines the value of a human life. *Mrs. Dalloway* hangs on to sensations: a tree in sunlight, a line remembered from a Shakespearean sonnet that rejects patriarchal supremacy.

Flowered Spaces: From Putrefaction to Renewal

Both Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence uses floral imagery and motif in their gender politics. In "Odour of Chrysanthemums", chrysanthemums are the relics of courtship, till it becomes a source of frustration in Elizabeth and quickly the "cold, deathly smell" perfume the cottage (Lawrence 248). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the novel iconically opens with the line "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (Woolf 2), showing agency in an action that society deems feminine and unimportant. Thus, Woolf subverts this feminine object to subsistence and quiet rebellion. While Lawrence's chrysanthemums symbolise decay and recognition, Woolf's flowers indicate renewal and slight agency.

Both Lawrence and Woolf's works demonstrate that patriarchal societies alienate women. However, they differ in their renderings of what follows disenchantment and disillusion. It is only when phallic power is killed that Elizabeth gains insight; the future ahead looks as gloomy as the coalfield she sees through her window. Meanwhile, Clarissa's realization is achieved while life pulsates. She goes back to the party, bearing flowers, to seek tiny moments of feeling. The divergence helps contemporary readers understand why Woolf represents a beacon of feminist optimism and Lawrence remains a controversial figure, lauded for psychological insight, reprimanded for ideological backwardness.

In both texts, death acts as a trigger for existential epiphany and a catalyst for truth. Walter's inert body reveals the marriage to be a hollow myth, and Septimus's ultimate defiance in death pushes Clarissa to confront the sacrifices she has made. Their reactions differ. Lawrence's short story closes with shock and inertia, suggesting that everything reduces to nothingness after the phallic order has been unveiled. Woolf, on the other hand, elicits action and motion in Clarissa. She is propelled into the current of life. This opens the path to Chapter Five, where time and mortality are read through Sartrean bad faith and a dialectic of immanence and transcendence in Beauvoir.

Chapter Five

Alienation, Time, and Death

In both *Mrs. Dalloway* and “Odour of Chrysanthemums,” time and the awareness of mortality permeate the texts, intensifying the sense of alienation in each protagonist and challenging her authenticity. Under the frameworks of Sartre’s bad faith and Beauvoir’s immanence vs. transcendence, Clarissa and Elizabeth navigate temporality, death, living in a way that allows for tenuous equilibrium within life, or reveals an ultimate truth while offering no solace. Both argue that a sobering confrontation with mortality has the capacity to dissolve illusion, but they differ on what is left and whether it can be lived.

Clarissa Dalloway: Time’s Pressure and Choosing Life

Clarissa Dalloway’s single day in 1923 London is marked by Big Ben, the timely public chimes that interrupt her reveries. Every hour dissipates, and the self must accommodate to this attrition. Clarissa is particularly aware of her human finitude as she has become “very white since her illness,” and her older years have “something of a make-believe” (Woolf 31). She exists in a society that values the man for his energy and productivity, as she also feels socially “invisible; unseen; unknown” (Woolf 10). Beauvoir’s description of women trapped in immanence is the social identity from which Clarissa reels- she is directed toward the role of a hostess, which is appreciated but provides only minimal acknowledged transcendence.

Clarissa is also living in Sartre's bad faith as she assumes the role prescribed to her, forgoing her existential freedom. Her lavish parties and skilled social comprehension are seen as potential defensive maneuvers. When Peter Walsh attempts to break the defensive walls when he says at Bourton that she is a "perfect hostess," instead of acknowledgement she hides (Woolf 9). However, Woolf does not simply place a mask on Clarissa. The truths Clarissa sometimes skirts are registered in her inner life. She oscillates between acts of role-plays and clear-eyed observation. The latter is situated at the center of the novel's moral climax.

Septimus Warren Smith's suicide is the a pivotal moment in the novel. After Sir William Bradshaw flippantly mentions that a young veteran has committed suicide, Clarissa retreats from the party and in her processing of this news, she feels connected to her foil. To her, in Septimus's death, "a thing there was that mattered," from which Septimus would not budge when attempted to be coerced into "proportion" and "conversion" (Woolf 184). Clarissa does not numb herself to this news by medicalizing him, instead, she retreats until she eventually decides she "must go back" (Woolf 185). The decision to return is profound; it is a kind of grace that Clarissa exemplifies: an acceptance of death without succumbing to despair, choosing instead to live anew among others.

The party approaches in linear time, and Clarissa's memories of desires from the past is intertwined with the present. Peter's "there she was" by the end of the night is not a sign of social conquest, but of personal reconnection: a woman who will go to live inside the everyday with this knowledge of death (Woolf 194). Clarissa achieves a semblance of Beauvoir's transcendence within limit: not public work but selected means of attention and connection beyond her role.

Elizabeth Bates: Disillusionment and the Finality of Death

If Big Ben is what marks the end of one day for Clarissa, Elizabeth's evening ticks by, in a slower, more lethargic tempo: "The fields were dreary and forsaken... tarred fowl-house" (Lawrence 281). Mundane repetition and waiting (i.e. immanence) characterized her married life: housework, disciplining children, fear of Walter coming home from the pit or the pub. Even the flowers in the title, which were once a symbol of marital intimacy, now become reminders of resentment and give off "a cold, deathly smell" (Lawrence 248), foreshadowing what is to come.

Elizabeth's bad faith allows her to escape from the reality of her role in the marital alienation, placing the blame squarely on Walter. That position, while not inaccurate, allows her to skirt the more profound reality of mutual alienation and her own considerably circumscribed freedom to do otherwise. Removed of garments and responsibilities, the deceased husband turns into "this separate stranger" (Lawrence 260), and Elizabeth perceives that her soul is left bare, exposed to truths that would otherwise stay hidden under the buffer of custom and bitterness (Lawrence 260).

Convergences and Divergences

Death for Woolf and Lawrence is an antidote to illusion. Mortality individuates in each: characters slide out of roles and find themselves with nothing to answer for except their own selves. In Septimus's defiance, Clarissa recognizes a claim that can likewise be made on the life she chooses to live: to accept suffering and contingency and still "go back" into the world of the living (Woolf 185). Elizabeth realizes the alienation that she and Walter hid; this epiphany offers no consolation, only the duty to fare forward within newfound truth (Lawrence 260-62). Sartre's

bad faith is repudiated at the critical moment; neither woman leans on the prefabricated tale in which society confines her.

If Woolf's modernist tone offers a fragile humanist affirmation, it lies in the potential that waning time might result in fuller attentiveness, and awareness of death might open onto an increased affective investment in the everyday. Clarissa's party, however seemingly frivolous, becomes a space where autonomy is practiced, not in grandiose actions but in the conscious choice to be present and show up for others, embracing life itself (Woolf 183–86, 194). Lawrence's realism is more scathing. The realization that Elizabeth experiences braces morality but is emotionally devastating. Authenticity is achieved and there is no coming back from it. Time does not just resume, carrying on with better composure; it opens upon a world void of comforting illusions and fewer resources.

Woolf uses the stream of consciousness to enable Clarissa to revise and rearrange her past and present, exercising authenticity as a repeated, daily endeavour. Lawrence wraps the narrative tighter, culminating years of denial succinctly into the instance of laying out the dead husband, leaving silence as the only response. Clarissa's party only appears frivolous in nature due to societal constructs associated with femininity, and Elizabeth's somber clarity is left high and dry in a world too taciturn for transcendence. Clarissa paves a path for herself to be able to live in death, while Elizabeth merely attains the truth that her life must sustain without reprieve.

For Clarissa Dalloway and Elizabeth Bates, time and death act as catalysts to recognize the disparity between identity and the roles they assume. Big Ben's "leaden circles" and Septimus's death allows for Clarissa to acknowledge death and choose life and the living (Woolf 4, 184–86, 194). For Elizabeth, the odour of chrysanthemums and the private truth of the body

reveal to Elizabeth years of alienation and isolation imposed by duty; her reality is a nakedness with no reward (248–62 Lawrence). Using the lenses of both Sartre and Beauvoir, we find that death and mortality rids individuals of bad faith and reveals radical freedom, unadulterated. Woolf writes on how this knowledge can be carried back to a genuine, reciprocal sociality. Lawrence leaves readers with a desolate form of clarity: the understanding is real but it is no cure. Either way, to come face to face with time and death is to attain the responsibility of life as one's own, however softened that experience, however grimly born.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This dissertation has been guided by the questions- How do Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* and D.H. Lawrence in “*Odour of Chrysanthemums*” portray women’s existential alienation? and In what ways do these portrayals reflect or diverge from Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s ideas of freedom, bad faith, and otherness? Through a qualitative, comparative close-reading of the two texts, focusing on pivotal scenes, narrative perspective, temporality, and recurring motifs, this paper has contested that early 20th century modernist literature depicts women’s existential alienation to be molded not only by Sartre’s generalized condition of radical freedom but but also by the gendered limitations that Beauvoir elaborates. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and “*Odour of Chrysanthemums*” (1911), Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence, respectively, show female characters confronting mortality, and thereby the reality of their alienation.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa Dalloway’s day in London is governed by Big Ben’s timely “leaden circles” (Woolf 4), constant reminders of the societal structures that inhibit her freedom. Still Clarissa does not fully give in to bad faith. Her reveries of the past with Sally Seton and her reaction to Septimus Smith’s defiance in death allows for brief moments of authenticity and slight transgression from society’s expectations. Her decision to re-enter the soiree after processing Septimus’s (who is only a stranger) death (Woolf 185) testifies Beauvoir’s concept of transcendence, however muted: her authenticity does not manifest in grandiose gestures but in unbridled presence and openness to connection. Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness technique and shifting perspective embodies this moment of presence.

Lawrence's vision is more pessimistic and realistic. Elizabeth Bates, after being so confined by immanence, meets the corpse of "the separate stranger" that is her husband and thus falls quiet (Lawrence 260). This life-changing epiphany breaks down her defenses, leaving behind the tragic realization that "She must live with herself, and the children and the fact that [Elizabeth and Walter] had been two separate people who never fused together despite sharing intimacy (Lawrence 262). She is left with the steely reality of her freedom; a much harsher outcome than that of Clarissa's.

Both texts agree with Sartre in that authenticity is achieved when there is disillusionment and with Beauvoir's theory that patriarchal myths regarding women intensify women's existential alienation. However, they differ in tonality and outcome for the protagonists. Woolf imagines that with attention and presence, even within confines, one can affirm a fragile humanism. Lawrence depicts realization as permanently alienating. Their differing styles- Woolf's flowing interiority and Lawrence's bleak realism- determine the stories' endings.

In the end, the comparative reading reveals that Clarissa and Elizabeth cannot be merely existential subjects or just creations of patriarchy. They are in the cross sections between the universal and the gendered. The floral motifs, Clarissa's flowers and Elizabeth's chrysanthemums, weave throughout the texts and symbolize the female myth constructed by society and life's temporality.

Using Sartre's and Beauvoir's theoretical frameworks to study Woolf and Lawrence, this paper has shown that modernist literature concerns itself with the complex web of freedom, gender, and death or mortality. Further research may extend this exploration to postcolonial or

narratives contemporary to the 21st century, in which distinct cultural settings might uncover further developments in the gendered existential alienation.

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