The Scars of Capitalism in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and 'Kew Gardens'

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Abstract

This paper discusses the scars of capitalism in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and 'Kew Gardens'. Following one day of the character's life, the discussion will investigate how the novel and the short story introduce the capitalist ideology that dictates the character's everyday life and how the characters, in different ways and to certain extents, react to it. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf depicts capitalism as an oppressive system that can be very rewarding to those who submit to its ideals and, at the same time, very catastrophic to those who try to confront it or question its validity. In 'Kew Gardens', the characters, affected by the looming war, try to come to terms with the meaningless materiality, the hollowness, and insecurity that capitalism produces; In both texts, capitalism is introduced as a tyrannous system that uses everything in the characters' everyday life as suppressive tools to enforce its values and maintain its continuity.

Keywords: Kew, Gardens, Dalloway, capitalism, Woolf.

ندوب الرأسمالية في رواية السيدة دلوي والقصة القصيرة ' كيو جاردنز ' للكاتبة فرجينيا وولف

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المستخلص

يناقش هذا البحث آثار الرأسمالية في رواية السيدة دلوي وفي قصة ' كيو جاردنز ' للكاتبة فرجينيا وولف. من خلال التركيز على يوم واحد من حياة الشخصيات في كلا النصين، يحقق البحث في كيفية تقديم الرواية والقصة القصيرة للايدلوجية الرأسمالية التي تتحكم في الحياة اليومية للشخصيات وكيف يكون رد فعل الشخصيات على ذلك. في رواية السيدة دلوي، صورت وللف الرسمالية على شكل نضام مستبد يكون كريم جدا مع الذين يخضعون لمبادئه وفي نفس الوقت يكون مدمر جدا للذين يخالفونه او يحققون في مدى شرعيته. في القصة القصيرة ' كيو جاردنز ' تأثر الشخصيات بالحرب التي هي على وشك الاندلاع، ويحاولون التأقلم مع ما تقدمه الرأسمالية من ال لا معنى، الفراغ، وعدم الشعور بالأمان. في كلا النصين، قدمت الرأسمالية على انها نضام طاغي بحيث يستخدم كل شي في حيات الشخصيات كأدوات قهر لكي يفرض مبادئه ولكي يديم بقائه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كيو، جاردنز، دلوي، رأسمالية، وولف.

Introduction:

Capitalism is fundamentally different from any other system because it is an "unhuman" and subversive mod of production that transforms everything, including human beings, into commodities (Emami, 2012, p. 759). According to Naomi Black, the First World War "[was] only one of the products, admittedly one of the worst products…", of such a system that based on power and domination (p. 7). The impact of this brutal conflict that brought an unimagined amount of death and suffering affected different aspects of people's lives and forced western intellectuals to reassess the values and ideals of capitalism. Literature was one of the fields that capitalism reshaped. The scars of capitalism, as Teodor Adorno mentions, are radically reflected in modernist art and mass culture: "…Both contain elements of change. Both are torn halves of freedom, to which however they do not add up" (Adorno & Benjamin, 1999, p. 123). In this paper, the scars of capitalism in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and 'Kew Gardens' will be discussed. Following one day of the characters' lives, the discussion will investigate how the novel and the short story introduce the capitalist ideology that dictates the character's everyday life and how the characters, in different ways and to certain extents, react to it. In both texts, capitalism is introduced as a tyrannous system that uses everything in the characters' everyday life as suppressive tools to enforce its values and maintain

its continuity. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf depicts capitalism as an oppressive system that can be very rewarding to those who submit to its ideals and, at the same time, very catastrophic to those who try to confront it or question its validity. This situation forces the characters to live an ambivalent life: on the one hand, by enjoying the materialistic luxurious way of living that capitalism provides, they are complicit in creating as well as maintaining the capitalist system; on the other hand, haunted by the visions of death or relaying on their beautiful memories, the characters view themselves as outsiders who criticize the state of shallowness and meaningless that capitalism creates, reject the repressive tools that it uses, and resist any kind of reconciliation that may help them to accept or forget the bloodshed and destruction of the war. Similarly, in 'Kew Gardens', the characters, affected by the looming war, try to come to terms with the meaningless materiality, the hollowness, and insecurity that capitalism produces; consequently, relying on their imaginations, they desperately try to create a surrogate natural world where meaning, peace, and optimistic future can be found; however, similar to *Mrs. Dalloway*, capitalism triumphs at the end when the devastating consequences of the war and the machinery of urban world interrupt the characters' dreams and force them back to the undesirable reality.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, from the very start, we are introduced to a capitalist way of living. Celebrating the city life, Clarissa describes her feeling while she is walking in the streets of London: "In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans[…]in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved" (Woolf, p. 2). The triumph of capitalism is represented by the technological and industrial side of the city. She, as well as the people in the streets, loves and cherishes this way of life "not in spite of its artifice but because of it" (Wood, 2010, p. 109).

Even though those people do not know each other, they form one unit that shapes one day of their everyday life under the dominant capitalist system. Like Clarissa, the crowds in the street rejoice "in the bellow and the uproar" of modern life (Woolf, p. 11).They share similar responses to this "commodity-driven environment" (Wood, 2010, p. 109). The spectacular presence of these signs of capitalism, such as motor cars, omnibuses, vans, and so forth, that unify the public's response is accentuated to show the power of the capitalist system that dictates the characters' everyday lives and uses everything around them to enforce its ideology. On the other hand, their unity signals their complicity in maintaining the continuity of the system: "At once they stood even straighter, and removed their hands, and seemed ready to attend their Sovereign […] as their ancestors had done before them" (Woolf, p. 11).

The symbols of the capitalist system are not only represented by the materialist commodities that people consume in their everyday life, but also by the spectacular appearance of the political figures:

> they had heard the voice of authority… But nobody knew whose face had been seen. Was it the Prince of Wales's, the Queen's, the Prime Minister's? Whose face was it? Nobody knew […] The motor car with its blinds drawn and an air of inscrutable reserve proceeded towards Piccadilly, still gazed at, still ruffling the faces on both sides of the street with the same dark breath of veneration whether for Queen, Prince, or Prime Minister nobody knew". (Woolf 8-10)

The political figures who symbolize the capitalist values and social hierarchy evoke the glory of the British Empire and the national pride. The mysterious appearance of these figures reminds English people of their leading position among other nations and how such position is deeply connected with the achievements of the capitalist system.

Shortly after that, the unifying appearance of the political figures is replaced by another scientific achievement of capitalism: "Suddenly Mrs. Coates looked up into the sky. The sound of an aeroplane bored ominously into the ears of the crowd. There it was coming over the trees, letting out white smoke from behind, which curled and twisted, actually writing something! making letters in the sky! Every one looked up" (Woolf 12). The smoke letters that the plane creates converts the sky into a free advertising space where everyone is invited to imagine his own advertisement: '"Glaxo,' said Mrs. Coates […] 'Kreemo,' murmured Mrs. Bletchley […] 'It's toffee,' murmured Mr. Bowley […]'" (Woolf 12-13).

However, in the midst of this lively environment, the images of death interrupt some characters' thoughts: "The War was over, except for some one like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed […] or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed […]" (Woolf, p. 2). By juxtaposing both images, Woolf indirectly criticizes the way that all these manifestations of capitalism are used as suppressive tools to conceal or deny the mourning of Mrs. Foxcroft and Lady Bexborough. In other words, this atmosphere of happiness and celebration is created to prevent people from questioning the capitalist system and its most devastating product, the war. It forces them to accept the bloodshed and "[pick up] life where it left off before the war […] as if the war had never taken place" (Briggs, 2006, p. 198).

Like Mrs. Foxcroft and Lady Bexborough, Clarissa is also haunted by all senseless deaths that disturb her luxurious way of living that capitalism provides

and make any kind of going on unbearable. In her moments of being, Clarissa tries to find a kind of reconciliation between her external life that enables her "to experience the pleasure of commodity culture" (Simpson, 2005, p. 18) and her internal reactions towards all this mourning and destruction that such culture has created: "She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that […] She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on" (Woolf 4). In this quotation, Clarissa explains two important things: firstly, she acknowledges that she is part of this system even if she manages to step outside it during these moments of "illumination" (Woolf 20); secondly, although Clarissa emphasizes that she will not justify anything to anyone, she starts and concludes her meditation by justifying her way of living. Her ambivalent statement reflects how guilty she feels of being complicit in such a system that silences, denies, and represses any kind of feeling or desire that questions its validity. Whilst she is watching the meaningless materiality around her, she realizes how her life has no real meaning, and how she becomes like any type of the commodities she watches every day. This feeling is emphasized by the way she recalls, "scene after scene" (Woolf 3), her old days in Bourton. The more she looks back to her previous years, the more she realizes how hollow her existence becomes: she recalls her memories about the old days with her friend Sally and how the behavior of the young girls, place, and the time seemed to be disconnected from the reality of the capitalist way of living (Woolf 20-22). In other words, in order to escape the oppression of this internal conflict, Clarissa spends most of her time recalling the beautiful memories before she became Mrs. Richard Dalloway. In these lines, she implies her rejection of the capitalist system by introducing Bourton as the place of freedom and possibilities where everything was allowed even homoerotic desires. All these memories took place in the countryside, away from the grand sings of capitalism, such as "motor cars", statues, and "Big Ben strikes", that enforce and uphold the authority of the capitalist system. Furthermore, by excluding Richard from her mediation, who acts as an "agent" that helps to enforce the dominant capitalist ideology (Froula, 2005, p. 115), she indirectly rejects the capitalist ideals and values that he symbolizes. Moreover, by recalling Sally's kiss, Clarissa denotes how capitalist ideology is so embedded in every aspect of the characters' life that uses marriage as a repressive tool to deny any desire that may destabilize its hegemony. As Mary C. Madden puts it, "society is at war with any but the kind of sexual relations that support Empire, colonialism, and birthing babies for war in order to maintain material dominance" (p. 176).

As a "product" of such a capitalist system (Benzel & Hoberman, 2004, p. 93), Clarissa is expected to have as many children as she can. Children who are used as commodities to support the system, fight its wars, and maintain its continuity. Now she is unable to do that and therefore this capitalist society has

no purpose for her: "Oh if she could have had her life over again […] now this body she wore […] seemed nothing--nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this being […] Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa any more; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway" (Woolf 6). Thinking about how she becomes now and compares it with her old days in Bourton, she realizes how her freedom, independence, and identity are robed from her. But, in spite of this feeling, Clarissa tries to convince herself that her life has meaning after all: "For in marriage a little licence, a little independence […] which Richard gave her, and she him" (Woolf 4). Here, she implies that such independence is based on the state of equality between her and Richard. But soon we discover that there is no equality in this situation because she wields no actual power. This fact is reviled when she is excluded from the lunch in Lady Bruton's house; the exclusion awakens in her a genuine sorrow, a yearning for the beautiful old days in Bourton, a feeling of how her "essential self has been consumed" (Glenny, 2000, p. 126).

However, Clarissa's revolt against the system is only available in her moments of being because the alternatives can be catastrophic for her. Her reaction to Septimus's death emphasizes that and shows her ambivalence, as an outsider and insider at the same time. On the one hand, she sympathizes with the young man who, in his suicide, has escaped "chatter", "corruption", "lies" and plunged "holding his treasure" (Woolf 121). On the other hand, like Richard and Bradshaw who use his death to help approve the "shell shock" bill (Woolf 120), "she accepts his death as the sacrifice that enable the party to go on - as if millions of war deaths have served only to guarantee the continuance of her way of life […]" (Briggs, 2006, p. 198): "She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away […] He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back" (Woolf 122).

Peter, on the other hand, like Clarissa, is deeply complicit in supporting the capitalist system, and at the same time he repeatedly introduces himself as an outside observer, an opposer to the patterns imposed by the capitalist system. Whilst he wildly criticizes Clarissa for supporting the English social system by accepting to marry Richard Dalloway, Peter, as a descendant of an Anglo-Indian capitalist family that has ruled "a district twice as big as Ireland" for three generations, has played an essential part in supporting and perpetuating the capitalist ideology (Woolf 31). His complicity is further emphasized by his reaction to the manifestations of capitalism in London streets. Like the crowds who are distracted by the mysterious appearance of the political figures, Peter positively responses to the military parade: "Boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue

praising duty […] One had to respect" (Woolf 33). On the one hand, the drill is used as a metaphor to show how the characters are expected to behave within the dominant capitalist ideology. The young men need to follow the same unseen instructions in order to create and maintain this perfect unity of the group. If anyone breaks the rules, the whole rhythm will collapse no matter how well the rest of the group may perform. On the other hand, the parade is also used as an advertising method to create a feeling of pride in the British Empire. Such pride is provoked even in Peter who repeatedly denies his complicity in legitimizing the dominant capitalist ideology: "(it's strange, he thought, what a sentiment I have about that, disliking India, and empire, and army as he did)" (Woolf 35).

On his way home, watching the ambulance making its way to the hospital, Peter connects the capitalist system with the existence of civilization: "One of the triumphs of civilisation, Peter Walsh thought. It is one of the triumphs of civilisation, as the light high bell of the ambulance sounded. Swiftly, cleanly the ambulance sped to the hospital, having picked up instantly, humanely, some poor devil" (Woolf 99). Ironically, the "triumphs of civilization" that Peter admires are what drives poor Septimus to kill himself.

His admiration shows how it is impossible for him to be an outside observer because the values of the dominant ideology are "so thoroughly embedded in [his] society that they [are] invisible" (Madden, 2006, p. 182). Such state of false consciousness, as Herman Rappaport puts it, occurs when the person thinks that [he is] capable of distinguishing between true and false […]" (p. 241). According to Louis Althusser, "[…] what thus seems to take place outside ideology […] in reality takes place in ideology. What really takes place in ideology seems therefore to take place outside it. That is why those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology […]" (p. 118). Like Clarissa, Peter's reaction to the meaningless materiality that he experiences every day and his inability, due to the socioeconomic benefits that he may lose, to take his defiance to its furthest limit lead to this state of false consciousness. While they are surrounded by a commercialized environment, both Peter and Clarissa enjoy the luxurious way of living that such an environment provides; at the same time, affected by the lingering consequences of the war, they covertly criticize the capitalist system by spending most of the day longing for solace in the beautiful old days of Bourton.

Septimus, like Clarissa and Peter, has participated in supporting the dominant capitalist system: "[he] was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England […]" (Woolf 56); however, after the devastating consequences of the war, he loses his faith in the war and its purpose. He becomes the most rebellious character against the war in particular and the

whole capitalist system in general; the real outsider who takes his defiance to its furthest limit and bears witness to capitalism "appalling crime[s]" (Woolf 63).

In his moments of being, Septimus serves as a reminder of the horrors of the war, and therefore becomes, to some extent, a danger that threatens the stability and continuity of the dominant ideology. Although such moments ruthlessly take him back to the young men who were cut to pieces along trenches, they are the only refuge that sets him free from the undesirable reality: "[…] there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings! "What are you saying?" said Rezia suddenly, sitting down by him. Interrupted again! She was always interrupting" (Woolf 15). Even such terrifying moments have to be interrupted "for Dr. Holmes had told [Rezia] to make her husband […] take an interest in things outside himself" (Woolf 13). These moments, as Dr. Holmes realizes, represent a potential threat because they become "a continual reminder of the waste of war" (Madden, 2006, p. 163): "I must tell the whole world, Septimus cried […] One cannot perpetuate suffering […]" (Woolf 45, 58).

In Septimus's case, we are introduced to time, represented by the giant tower of Big Ben, as the most powerful repressive tool. Its "leaden circles" that "dissolved in the air" every thirty minutes are used to unite the characters, interrupt their dreams or memories, and organize their life. By recalling everyone to the present moment, time becomes the commodity that the characters rationally consume in order to be productive: "Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing […] counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion […]" (Woolf 67). Unlike the other tools, it strikes very hard without any warning, and everyone is obliged to feel its irreversible effect. Moreover, the power of time derives from its linear progression that serves to deny all the horrors of the war by interrupting the characters' private moments and force them back to reality.

For Septimus, time is not merely an interruptive tool that forces him back to the undesirable reality: '"It is time,' said Rezia. The word 'time' split its husk; poured its riches over him; and from his lips fell like shells, like shavings from a plane […]" (Woolf 45). The sound of the bell reminds him of the sound of the shell on the battlefield. The intervention of time with all its violence and brutality becomes a significant element in the ideological war that is waged to defend the capitalist system.

When Septimus escalates his defiance, doctors are pointed to shut him up. Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, who gain a high rank in the social hierarchy for their effort in treating shell-shocked soldiers, are "gate keepers" (Froula, 2005, p. 113) of the system that scapegoats Septimus when he asks the

question that neither Clarissa nor Peter dares to ask: '"Must,' 'must,' why 'must'? What power had Bradshaw over him? 'What right has Bradshaw to say 'must' to me?' he demanded"' (Woolf 97). They reflect how ruthless and damaging the dominant ideology can be against those who resist it: "Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you […] Human nature is remorseless" (Woolf 64). The sense of proportion that they follow shows how they function as repressive tools rather than caretakers. For Bradshaw, everyone should behave according to specific socially accepted models. Those who violate such models, like Septimus, become dangerous to society and therefore they will be quarantined and coercively converted into normalcy again: "He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up" (Woolf 67). This denotes Bradshaw's real aim in this facility: he does not really care about his victims' health, but rather he wants to shut them up to eliminate the possible threat they may pose. His work is only one part of this very complicated and systematic violence that the system uses against those who threaten "conformity" (Whitworth, 2005, p. 136).

However, Septimus's defiance leads to his death. By throwing himself from the window, Septimus finally manages to set himself free from all the barriers that society puts around him. He finally manages to communicate, as Clarissa notices, and inform people how he really feels. On the other hand, his tragic death also shows the irresistible power of the dominant ideology, how far it is possible to confront or avoid it, and how catastrophic it can be to those who try to undermine its authority.

In 'Kew Gardens', readers are introduced from the very start to the detailed description of the natural beauty of the place by focusing on explaining the colures and shapes of the flowerbeds where we are introduced to the married couple who wander the gardens "with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed" (Woolf, Kew Gardens, p. 1). This comparison, the fusion, between human and nonhuman objects creates a joyful tone to help the couple to evade the isolation and meaninglessness of materialistic urban life. Although the first appearance of the married couple reflects deep isolation and melancholy, they start to reform their feeling by recalling the beautiful past and connect it with the beauty of nature:

> The man was about six inches in front of the woman, strolling carelessly, while she bore on with greater purpose, only turning her head now and then to see that the children were not too far behind. The man kept this distance in front of the woman purposely, though perhaps unconsciously, for he wished to go on with his thoughts. "Fifteen years ago I came here with Lily," he thought. "We sat somewhere over there by a lake and I

> begged her to marry me all through the hot afternoon. How the dragonfly kept circling round us: how clearly I see the dragonfly and her shoe with the square silver buckle at the toe […] And my love, my desire, were in the dragonfly […] Tell me, Eleanor. D'you ever think of the past?" […] "For me, a kiss. Imagine six little girls sitting before their easels twenty years ago, down by the side of a lake, painting the water-lilies, the first red water-lilies I'd ever seen. And suddenly a kiss, there on the back of my neck". (Woolf, Kew Gardens, pp. 1-2)

In this paragraph, like the characters of *Mrs. Dalloway*, we see how they try to replace their isolation by recalling their beautiful past and, at the same time, associate this kind of missing happiness with natural objects. For Simon, his love was deeply connected with the dragonfly whilst Eleonore attached hers with the red water-lilies. They use the beauty of nature to replace the meaningless materiality of everyday life that causes their isolation and melancholy in the first place. On the other hand, in their beautiful past, they find the security and stability of the old days. This is emphasized when the narrator shifts the focus towards the plight of the snail which, despite all the obstacles in his way, "appear[s] to have a definite goal in front of it […]" (Woolf, Kew Gardens, p. 2). This kind of adventure is what the first couple lack: a linear progression towards a definite goal, an optimistic future that may help them to cope with all this destruction and horrors around them. Only in their beautiful past such meaningful life is available.

As the story continues, we are introduced to the old man who reveals the main reason that provokes the characters to question their materialistic way of living and yearn to their past: "He was talking about spirits–the spirits of the dead, who, according to him, were even now telling him all sorts of odd things about their experiences in Heaven" (Woolf, Kew Gardens, p. 3). He, like everyone else, is haunted by the spirits of the millions of young men who were cut to pieces along trenches. He refuses to see the peaceful scene of the sky as the other characters do, on the contrary, he persistently reminds them by other images where modern warfare uses the sky to create death and horrors: '"Heaven was known to the ancients as Thessaly, William, and now, with this war, the spirit matter is rolling between the hills like thunder"' (Woolf, Kew Gardens, p. 3). His obsession with the two "Women in black" works as a reminder of the horrors of the war as well as reflecting his defiance to any attempt to denies it. However, similar to Septimus, he is instantly interrupted by William because such behaver threatens the legitimacy of the ongoing war in particular and the capitalist dominant system in general: "But William caught him by the sleeve and touched a flower with the tip of his walking-stick in order to divert the old man's attention" (Woolf, Kew Gardens, p. 3).

Suddenly "the drone of the aeroplane" interprets the characters' meditations and the Edenic qualities of Kew Gardens are transformed to a such hot place "that even the thrush chose to hop, like a mechanical bird, in the shadow of the flowers" (Woolf, Kew Gardens, p. 5). The characters who have experienced natural contentment become like machines: "one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passe[s] the flower-bed […]" (Woolf, Kew Gardens, p. 5). As the characters are forced to abandon their moments of being, the natural beauty of Kew Gardens is placed in an ominous environment of urbanization and industrialization where "… children's voices no longer rupture a pastoral silence but instead are drowned by the incessant drone of "motor omnibuses . . . turning their wheels and changing their gears; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another" (Johnson, 2001).

The end of the story suggests how it is impossible for the characters to avoid capitalism, become outsiders because even when they are amidst the flowerbeds, they are in fact at the heart of the capitalist world: Kew Gardens is situated in London in a period of tremendous modernization. Like Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus, here the characters may try to run away from the capitalist system by relying on their imaginations, but in reality, they cannot run far enough.

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