

Mr Willett's Summer Time

For the great revolution of Mr Willett's summer time had taken place since Peter Walsh's last visit to England. The prolonged evening was new to him. It was inspiring, rather. For as the young people went by with their despatch-boxes, awfully glad to be free, proud too, dumbly, of stepping this famous payment, joy of a kind, cheap, tinselly, if you like, but all the same rapture, flushed their faces. They dressed well too; pink stockings; pretty shoes. They would now have two hours at the pictures. It sharpened, it refined them, the yellow-blue evening light; and on the leaves in the square shone lurid, livid - they looked as if dipped in sea-water - the foliage of a submerged city. (Mrs Dalloway, 161-162)

As I mentioned in class last Thursday, the reference at the beginning of this passage is to [William Willett](#), generally regarded as the inventor of daylight savings time. He first proposed the idea in a 1907 pamphlet entitled "Waste of Daylight," but it took World War I to make the idea catch on. Woolf calls the time shift "Mr Willett's summer time," and in England it is still known as "British Summer Time."

The reference is important for a few reasons.

One reason is that it belongs to a pattern of references to time in *Mrs Dalloway*, a pattern that also includes the repeated mentions of London's Big Ben, whose chime ("first a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable") marks the passage of the hours throughout the single day during which the novel takes place.

As [Segan points out in a recent blogpost](#), Michael Cunningham sought to highlight this pattern by naming his [genetically modified](#) version of Woolf's novel *The Hours*. In focusing on the unstoppable passage of time ("the hour, irrevocable"), both novels remind us of the relentless, one-way progress of any human life towards death; and as [Segan points out in a companion blogpost](#), the emphasis on death is another feature of Woolf's novel that Cunningham looks to reproduce with his own genetic modifications.

But in both novels time figures not only as the marking of hours towards death. As we discussed in class, chronological time may move relentlessly in one direction, but our mental experience of time is multi-directional and fluid (one reason for all that water imagery in Woolf).

So time matters but doesn't matter; our lives run one way towards death, but while we live we are able, at any moment, to be anywhere in time.

Another way in which time doesn't matter is that no matter when in history we live, we face problems and rewards that other humans always have and (presumably) always will face - such as the inevitability of death. So as humans we are in important ways all alike no matter when we live.

But another way in which time does matter is that the particular moment in history at which we find ourselves alive has its own feel. Woolf's description of one London evening attempts to capture the texture of life in a particular city for a particular person at a particular historical moment, after Europe's "Great War" of 1914-1918, after the great influenza epidemic (1918-1919) that nearly killed Clarissa and permanently scarred her heart, after William Willett's summer time changed the sensation of being out for a city walk in the evening, creating the peculiar late summer light in which Peter Walsh observes women dressed in the fashion of 1923 ("pink stockings; pretty shoes") on their way to spending two hours from their short lives at an entertainment still relatively new for the time, and still silent: "the pictures."