Mrs. Dalloway, however, questions such ruralist prejudices from the outset by challenging the idea that rural life is stable and idyllic. Woolf’s novel famously opens with Clarissa Dalloway stepping out of her London home in Bond Street to go and buy flowers for a party that she intends to give in the evening. The scene she encounters immediately reminds Clarissa of a more rural past at Bourton, the stately country home of her youth:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen [...]. (3)

On the one hand, Clarissa immediately associates the freshness of the morning air in the city with life in the country, though the air there had been “stiller than this of course.” However, the rural stillness at Bourton is not an unequivocally positive feature for Clarissa; it seems like the “kiss of a wave” and yet somehow solemn, as if “something awful was about to happen.” Moreover, later in the novel, we learn that Clarissa’s rural past is indeed associated with a very personal tragedy, as her only sister was killed in the woods near Bourton by a falling tree (85). In contrast to common celebrations of rural England, there is thus, from the beginning, little sense in Mrs. Dalloway that homes in the country are necessarily more idyllic or carefree than city abodes.

Revisiting the Country House

Importantly, to say that Mrs. Dalloway constitutes a critique of countryside ideals is not to deny any idyllic dimension to Clarissa’s more rural home at Bourton, as some pastoral scenes in Woolf’s novel constitute a self-conscious reworking of the literary topos that Terry Gifford has called “country-house Arcadias” (66). This is particularly evident in those scenes that focus on Clarissa’s intimate friendship with Sally Seton, whom Clarissa continues to remember with glowing affection: “Had not that, after all, been love?” (35). The loving

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4 It is in part due to this anti-modern celebration of the countryside that the work of many English ‘modernists’ seems tame and insular when compared to avant-garde writing from the United States, Ireland, or the Continent (Esty 33–35).
relationship between the two women culminates, on the terrace at Bourton one star-lit night, in a glorious, passionate kiss:

Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. (38)

Such celebrations of same-sex affection have long been characteristic of pastoral literature; homoerotic desire was, for instance, already a central concern in the Idylls of Theocritus (Holmes M. Morgan), and by the seventeenth century one of pastoral’s primary interests was its “participation in fields of sexual deviation” (Bredbeck 200). It is thus possible to read the love scene between Sally and Clarissa not primarily as a moment of rural authenticity, but instead as a self-consciously literary evocation of pastoral conventions.

However, whereas pastoral texts generally allow the same-sex lovers more than merely a brief moment of bliss, in Mrs. Dalloway Sally and Clarissa are immediately interrupted by their friend Peter Walsh, who asks whether they have been star-gazing: “It was shocking; it was horrible! [... Clarissa] felt his hostility; his jealousy; his determination to break into their companionship” (39). The pastoral idyll of homoerotic desire is evoked only to be immediately shattered. It is thus fitting that shepherds – those staple ingredients of classical pastoral (Gifford 15) – are only hinted at in the vaguest of terms in Mrs. Dalloway, when we learn that Clarissa, in her youth at Bourton, owned a “great shaggy dog which ran after sheep” (65). Similarly, though the name of Clarissa’s sister, Sylvia (Latin for ‘forest’ or ‘woods’), carries strong pastoral associations (Abel 111), her death – being killed by a falling tree – gives this generic link a decidedly non-idyllic, black-humored twist. The homely rural idyll of Clarissa’s youth at Bourton is, in short, suffused with conflict, self-consciously artificial, and fragile at best.

If the general literary tradition of country-house Arcadias is reworked in Mrs. Dalloway to challenge common preconceptions about rural innocence and stability, the novel also more specifically refers to a novel by Jane Austen to broaden the scope of the domestic novel beyond the confines of the heterosexual courtship plot. As Raymond Williams notes, Jane Austen’s novels are centrally concerned with estates, incomes, and social position as indispensable elements

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5 It is, admittedly, possible to place Sylvia’s death in the long-standing tradition of pastoral that highlights the presence of death even in Arcadia (‘Et in Arcadia ego’; see Gifford 154; Heusser 183). However, naming someone who is killed by a tree ‘Sylvia’ nevertheless constitutes a peculiarly cruel variation on the motif.
of all the relationships that are formed (113). In order, Williams continues, to solve the ensuing conflict between economic interest and moral value, Jane Austen “guides her heroines, steadily, to the right marriages” (115); the transmission of wealth is secured through a match between those characters whom the narrative has revealed as being most worthy of it. At the beginning of the heroine’s journey, her family home tends to be under threat; at the end, she is rewarded with an equally deserving husband and a new, far more exquisite home somewhere in rural England (Moretti, Atlas of the European Novel 18).

Elizabeth Abel astutely observes that this fictional universe is evoked in Mrs. Dalloway when Clarissa at first mishears her future husband’s family name as “Wickham,” thus linking him to arguably the most disreputable character in Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813). According to Abel, this explicit intertextual reference draws attention to how Woolf’s novel modifies the standard courtship plot of Austen’s fiction:

Woolf condenses the […] moment that constitutes Austen’s novel and locates it in a remembered scene thirty years prior to the present of her narrative […]. Marriage in Mrs. Dalloway provides impetus rather than closure to the courtship plot, dissolved into a retrospective oscillation between two alluring possibilities as Clarissa continues to replay the choice she made thirty years before. (107)

The home of Clarissa’s youth, Abel reminds us, was also the scene of her marriage choice, with Peter Walsh and Richard Dalloway as the two competing male suitors. However, while Austen’s novels conclude with the heroine reaching the goal of the ‘right’ marriage, the suggestion in Mrs. Dalloway that Richard is similar to Austen’s deceitful George Wickham intimates that Clarissa may in fact have made the wrong choice. This suspicion is, if not explicitly confirmed, then at least kept alive by the fact that much of Woolf’s novel focuses on Clarissa’s lingering doubts, with the heroine sometimes thanking heaven that she refused to marry Peter, yet at other times wishing she had agreed to his proposal rather than to Richard’s (50–51; see Bowlby 147). Whereas in Jane Austen’s novels marriage at least superficially signifies happiness, maturity, and narrative closure, in Mrs. Dalloway the country-house world of romantic fulfillment becomes, instead, the past as prelude to the heroine’s conflicts in later life, as well as a subtly playful intertextual reference point.

At the same time, we need to bear in mind that, by the 1920s, life in the actually existing English country houses had itself become a mode of playful perform-