ance for the nations’ upper class. Since at least the late nineteenth century, the average stately home in the country had few (if any) remaining ties with rural life in the sense of agricultural work; such country houses were, rather, the setting for “ritual enactments” of country life, maintained “on the profits of industrial and imperial development” (Raymond Williams 282). In Mrs. Dalloway, we only have to listen to the rural daydreams of Clarissa’s daughter, Elizabeth, to hear echoes of such upper-class performances as disconnected from the social reality of English farmers:

She might be a farmer. [...] She might own a thousand acres and have people under her. She would go and see them in their cottages. [...] One might be a very good farmer – and that, strangely enough, [...] was almost entirely due to Somerset House. It looked so splendid, so serious, that great grey building. And she liked the feeling of people working. (149)

Hierarchy and privilege are central to this fantasy of rural England (“She might [...] have people under her”), and even Elizabeth acknowledges that Somerset House – situated in the heart of the city and, at the time, home to the government’s principal tax and public record offices (Showalter 224n58) – is the main reason why someone like her might one day be able to style herself as a good ‘farmer,’ for it is the supposedly urban political and financial system that enables a small group of country-house owners to enjoy “the feeling of people working” (emphasis added). Importantly, to highlight the links between the country and the city is not to contradict Elizabeth Abel’s observation that Clarissa herself sees Bourton as a pastoral world that is spatially and temporally disjoint from London, the sociopolitical world of her husband Richard (108). It does mean, however, that Woolf’s novel as a whole portrays ‘rural’ country-house Arcadias as only superficially isolated from the city, whereas in fact they are part of the same overarching social system. Accordingly, we must now leave the countryside and devote our attention to the urban spaces of Mrs. Dalloway.

**Street Haunting: Flânerie, Gender, and Class**

Just as Mrs. Dalloway’s engagement with ‘country-house England’ constitutes a meticulous reworking of ruralist and pastoral traditions, its depiction of life in the city draws on an already existing image: the urban wanderer or flâneur. As Raymond Williams points out, the experience and perception of the modern city

---

7 Historically, the country and the city have been part of the same economic order since the agricultural and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth century, if not earlier (McKeon, The Secret History of Domesticity 689; Raymond Williams 98).
has been “associated, from the beginning, with a man walking, as if alone, in its streets” (233). Long before Williams, Walter Benjamin had devoted sustained theoretical attention to this key figure of modernity, and Sharon Marcus notes how in Benjamin’s writings the city street sometimes appears curiously cozy – almost more homelike than city homes themselves (13–14). Indeed, what is ultimately at stake in Benjamin’s as well as later discussions of flânerie is whether the urban wanderer’s experience of the modern city can be described as a new way of belonging – a genuinely modern sense of home – or whether such urban experiences need to be understood in terms of increasing anomie and alienation.

The figure of the flâneur – around whom these problems coalesced – was, for most critics writing after Benjamin, predominantly male: the relatively privileged man of means who appears in the poems of Charles Baudelaire, or in such stories as Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (Parsons 4).\(^8\) We also find such a privileged male flâneur in Mrs. Dalloway, in Clarissa’s old friend Peter Walsh, whose life Woolf’s heroine considers to have been a failure (8), but who nevertheless clearly belongs to imperial Britain’s wealthy elite. In one of the many scenes from Woolf’s novel in which Peter is wandering through the streets of London, he encounters an attractive young woman and decides secretly to follow her:

> [S]he’s not married; she’s young; quite young, thought Peter, the red carnation he had seen her wear as she came across Trafalgar Square burning again in his eyes and making her lips red. [...] There was a dignity about her. She was not worldly, like Clarissa; not rich, like Clarissa. Was she, he wondered as she moved, respectable? [...] He was an adventurer, reckless, he thought, swift, daring [...] He was a buccaneer. (58)

Peter, the bourgeois man of means, turns the young woman who is “not rich, like Clarissa,” into a spectacle for his own consumption: an erotic fantasy that he admits is “half made up” (59). And in this, too, he resembles the flâneurs in Baudelaire, where according to Deborah L. Parsons women are objectified by

---

\(^8\) Note, however, that recently critics have also traced accounts of female flânerie as far back as the mid-nineteenth century (e.g. Gleber 12).
the leisured male spectator while they themselves rarely appear in a position that would allow them to become the observers of others (25).⁹

At the same time, as Parsons rightly points out, there is an element of conscious parody about the way in which Peter observes the city, in “an attitude of rebellion yet ultimate conventionality” (73); Peter styles himself a “buccaneer,” but he is in fact a much more common and decidedly less daring figure: a middle-aged man silently fantasizing about a much younger woman in an attempt to escape “(only of course for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was” (57). Indeed, we can see how far Peter is from being a true rebel in the scene that immediately precedes this fantasied ‘adventure.’ After a visit in Bond Street, Peter feels dissatisfied with Clarissa’s conventionality (53), and he begins to reflect on his own position within the Dalloway’s social circle:

He was not old, or set, or dried in the least. As for caring what they said of him – the Dalloways, the Whitbreads, and their set, he cared not a straw – not a straw (though it was true he would have, some time or other, to see whether Richard couldn’t help him to some job). (55)

Peter once again styles himself as a non-conformist, yet at the same time he hopes to profit from his association with the Dalloways. Even so, Peter would like to believe that his own private enthusiasms will, one day, stand revealed as prefiguring nothing less than the future of society as a whole:

He had been sent down from Oxford – true. He had been a Socialist, in some sense a failure – true. Still the future of civilisation lies, he thought, in the hands of young men like that; of young men such as he was, thirty years ago; with their love of abstract principles; getting books sent out to them all the way from London to a peak in the Himalayas; reading science; reading philosophy. The future lies in the hands of young men like that, he thought. (55)

---

⁹ See for instance the following passage from Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter in Modern Life,” in which the gendered nature of the flâneur becomes increasingly apparent: “For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up a house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, and that are – or are not – to be found” (9). For a concise summary of Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s ideas about the flâneur see Tally (Spatiality 95–99).
Tellingly, however, immediately after this imperial vision of a future created by intellectual ‘renegades’ like him, Peter witnesses a troop of boys parading “in uniform, carrying guns, [...] on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” (55). This juxtaposition suggests, for one thing, that the real future may lie, not with bookish young men in love with abstract principles, but with uniformed boys carrying guns, “drugged into a stiff yet staring corpse by discipline” (56). Moreover, it is important to note that this band of boys are on their way to the Cenotaph, a monument commemorating the dead of the Great War and, as such, one of the most “arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism” (Anderson 9). Typically Peter, though not entirely uncritical, ultimately remains convinced that, even if one laughed at such a display, “one had to respect it” (56). We are, significantly, not given a reason why, precisely, “one” ought to respect a militarization of everyday life; Peter merely asserts the fact as self-evidently the appropriate thing for an Englishman to do – which shows just how far Peter is from being a truly reckless “adventurer” or “buccaneer.” As an urban wanderer in London, Peter corresponds to the literary figure of the flâneur, but as was the case with pastoral idylls and the romance of Austen’s stately homes, Mrs. Dalloway evokes this figure in part to lay bare its conventional ideological bias.

This is not to suggest that wandering through the city is seen as an inherently reprehensible pursuit in Woolf’s novel. On the contrary, Mrs. Dalloway to some extent celebrates the liberating potential that ‘street haunting’ can offer for women, in particular. Clarissa, for example, loves to wander through the streets of London, insisting that it is “better than walking in the country” (6). As Laura Marcus points out, through their entry into the public spaces of the city upper- and middle-class women in early twentieth-century literature frequently found “liberation from enclosure in the private, domestic sphere” of the home (61; see also Parsons 27). Virginia Woolf’s own essay on “Street Haunting” (1927) constitutes a particularly important document from this corpus of female literature about the city, for it explicitly suggests that one may feel a sense of liberation when leaving one’s home – a home in which one sits “surrounded by objects

10 See also Pam Morris, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism 66–67.
11 Note that Sharon Marcus has cautioned against an overly strict conception of separate spheres (without, however, denying the concept’s heuristic value): “Feminist scholarship showed how a host of nineteenth-century discourses and practices defined the home as a private, cloistered space, advocated women’s restriction to that space, and correspondingly excluded women from the easy commerce with the city’s public spaces that was the privilege of many men. Crucial as that demonstration was, it anchored those divisions too securely and fixed their extent too widely” (6–7).
which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience” (177):

[W]hen the door shuts on us, all that vanishes. The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. (178)

Leaving the home is thus similar to breaking out of a constricting shell, and as we wander through the city, “everything seems miraculously sprinkled with beauty” (181); we can finally “leave the straight lines of personality” and explore more fully both our own potential and, imaginatively, the lives of others (187). Clarissa, in Mrs. Dalloway, clearly feels some of the euphoric delight described in Woolf’s essay: after her “plunge” into the London streets, she encounters “what she loved: life; London; this moment of June” (4). For women like Clarissa, then, the streets of London may appear, not as the urban nightmare so frequently envisioned by mournful pastoralists, but as a counter-homely source of vitality and regeneration (Whitworth 153).

Nevertheless, if we compare Mrs. Dalloway and Woolf’s essay on “Street Haunting” more closely, we find that there are limits to these texts’ celebration of female flânerie. On the one hand, the two texts have much in common, for both open with a figure leaving the home and subsequently becoming enthralled by the sights and sounds of the city. On the other hand, according to Woolf’s essay the ideal times for such wanderings are evenings in winter (177), while in Mrs. Dalloway Clarissa leaves her home around ten in the morning, on a day in mid-June (3–4). Consequently, if we take the essay’s celebration of street haunting on winter evenings at face value, then this might imply a subtle critique of Clarissa Dalloway’s wanderings, which take place at a different time of the day and year. In addition, though it is true that Woolf’s essay celebrates the liberating sense of dissolution that comes when one imaginatively merges with the darkening crowd, it also posits that there are both temporal and social limits to such delights:

[T]o escape is the greatest of pleasures; street haunting in winter the greatest of adventures. Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round, and shelter and enclose the self, which has been blown about at so many street corners, which has battered like a moth at the...
flame of so many inaccessible lanterns, sheltered and enclosed. Here again is the usual door; here the chair turned as we left it and the china bowl and the brown ring on the carpet. (187)

Escaping to the city, this passage suggests, is a pleasure for those who know they can return, after a relatively brief period of time, to the “old possessions” and the comfort of their homes. The idea of flux and instability is thus, as we have already seen in the discussion of The Mill on the Floss, much more attractive for those with stable homes than for those who live, precariously, on the edge of a socio-economic abyss. It is not purely coincidental, then, that in both Mrs. Dalloway and “Street Haunting” the forays into the city streets are, at least ostensibly, motivated by the protagonists’ intention of buying non-essential commodities: a pencil in the essay (177), and flowers in the novel. In short, whether male or female, flânerie remains an unequivocally class-based aesthetics: a leisured way of consuming the sights and sounds of the city, and thus a kind of pleasure that is not equally available to all.

The importance of class to Mrs. Dalloway’s depictions of female flânerie is confirmed in a scene in which Elizabeth, Clarissa’s daughter, boards an omnibus to travel through London’s legal and commercial district, for here we discover just how small the world of the novel’s flâneurs really is. We learn, early on in Woolf’s novel, that for Clarissa the omnibus is a typically middle-class mode of transport (18), which in turn may explain why the narrator places so much emphasis on the unusual nature of Elizabeth’s excursion: “Suddenly Elizabeth stepped forward and most competently boarded the omnibus, in front of everybody” (148). There is a palpable note of ridicule here, in the text’s emphasis on Elizabeth’s competence and daring, and it seems fitting that Elizabeth indulges in her classist daydreams about visiting farmers in their cottages precisely at this moment, for her trip on the omnibus is daring or “reckless” (148) only according to very narrow standards of upper-class respectability. Moreover, like Peter, Elizabeth does not indulge in her little act of rebellion for very long: “She

13 In Robin Lippincott’s appropriation of Woolf’s novel, Mr. Dalloway (1999), there is an interesting moment when Richard Dalloway encounters an old man selling violets in the street: “He had always warned Clarissa against giving to the poor – not because he didn’t want to help them – he did – but because of his belief that giving did them no good, no good whatsoever. ‘They must learn to help themselves,’ he had told her. ‘And that we can help them with – laws and whatnot.’ But this was different. For he felt as though he could be this man – turned out; no home; alone. Such thoughts had occurred to him during the past year when life as he had known it had felt so very, so terribly threatened; fragile” (33). Though the sense of instability that worries Richard in this passage is not truly economic, it still leads him to look with new dread at the idea of material homelessness.
must go home. She must dress for dinner” (150; see Bowlby 146). On her way back to Bond Street, Elizabeth in fact herself defines the perspective from which her excursion seems adventurous: “[N]o Dalloways came down the Strand daily,” and her mother surely “would not like her to be wandering off alone like this” (151–152). The Strand, incidentally, leads away from Westminster, the center of government, to the civil and commercial center of the city, and even in the early nineteenth century, Beau Brummell, a well-known arbiter of fashion, reportedly expressed great mortification at being discovered as far east as that (Roy Porter 99). The area is clearly beyond (as well as below) the socio-geographical circle within which the Dalloways and their likes are wont to move. To style Elizabeth’s trip as a great, non-conformist act of resistance would thus mean to judge it from a very limited upper-class perspective – and, conversely, to expand the term resistance to a point where it no longer retains any real political meaning (Loomba 203).

We can say more generally, then, that Mrs. Dalloway maps the social limitations of its characters’ homes onto the urban geography of London. David Dowling has meticulously traced the itineraries of five central characters in Woolf’s novel – Clarissa, Richard, and Elizabeth, as well as Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith – and his maps show that virtually all the action of the novel’s present takes place in Westminster. Dowling’s itineraries, in fact, cover more or less the same part of London as Franco Moretti’s maps of the so-called silver-fork novels, a largely forgotten genre that thrived between 1810 and 1840 and which, according to Moretti, depicted not a city but a particular class: the fashionable part of English society that would never stray as far as London’s East End (Atlas of the European Novel 79). Moreover, we find that none of the Dalloways even venture as far as Oxford Street, which according to one of Woolf’s own essays “is not London’s most distinguished thoroughfare,” and was rather looked-down upon by the more fashionable people who shop in “secret crannies off Hanover Square, round about Bond Street” (“Oxford Street Tide” 199). And Bond Street is, of course, precisely where the Dalloways live: far from the working-class squalor of the East End tenements, and sheltered from the ‘vulgar’ middle-class display of Oxford Street, in one of the most affluent areas in the city of London. The physical location of the Dalloways’ house, together with their everyday urban itineraries, thus allows us to define with great precision their ‘home space’ within the city of London – a space that may seem fluid and mobile, but which in fact is rigidly circumscribed by the boundaries of social class.