The centrality of time is also evident in Woolf’s working title for *Mrs. Dalloway*, “The Hours” (Jo-Ann Wallace 18; York 52).

Power politics intruded [...] and Britain found itself forced – by circumstances and by preference – to back away from its stated commitments to the Armenians. This found its clearest expression in the half-hearted attempts by the British authorities to bring arrested Young Turk leaders before a military or criminal tribunal after the war; most of those in British custody were ultimately released, with only a few trials of minor figures having taken place (resulting in few convictions). (Totten and Bartrop 20)

Given the British government’s failure to keep its promises to the Armenian people, one could hardly blame Clarissa for being angered, perhaps even disillusioned. However, for her to opt for indifference – to care more about her roses and do nothing at all – is hardly the appropriate response, especially for someone so closely associated to the very governing class that has failed to keep its promises to the Armenians in the first place. This, however, is precisely what Clarissa prefers to do: to forget the war, and in particular to repress the fact that she is guilty by association. Accordingly, while we began the discussion of Woolf’s novel with an emphasis on the *spatial* dimensions home (e.g. country-house Arcadias, or the social geography of imperial London), we must now turn to the problem of history, and thus the temporality of belonging.

**Time on the Clock vs. Time in the Mind**

At first sight, it seems plausible to relate a recurring hostility against clocks in *Mrs. Dalloway* to Clarissa’s desire to repress historical responsibility. However, as Randall Stevenson has shown, such hostility against mechanical timepieces occurs frequently in modernist fiction in general, and was to some extent shared by contemporary philosophers like Henri Bergson, who believed that time exists as duration within the self: a seamless continuum of conscious states, rather than a sequence of mechanically divisible and measurable items (Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction* 105). There is, in the words of the narrator in Woolf’s *Orlando*, a “discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind” (95), and precisely this discrepancy is highlighted in *Mrs. Dalloway* through one of its leitmotifs: the sound of a bell tolling the hour, penetrating even into the private space of the home and interrupting a character’s introspective mood (e.g. 103, 139–140 and 204). ¹⁴

¹⁴ The centrality of time is also evident in Woolf’s working title for *Mrs. Dalloway*, “The Hours” (Jo-Ann Wallace 18; York 52).
According to Stevenson, there are historically specific reasons why Woolf and her contemporaries were so concerned with mechanical time and its impact on people’s everyday lives. For one thing, Stevenson argues, the spread of the railways in the mid-nineteenth century had made it necessary to standardize time throughout Britain, and thus contributed to an increasingly strict regime of time-keeping. Moreover, the newly regulated working environment of the industrial factories ensured that standardized time became an everyday reality for millions of laborers (e.g. through the ritual of ‘clocking in’ and ‘clocking out’; *Modernist Fiction* 113–114). The complexity of military action during the Great War, finally, depended on exact synchronization and thus contributed to the spread of wristwatches (116). For all these reasons, Stevenson suggests, mechanical timepieces not only became an increasingly prominent feature in people’s lives; they also came to symbolize a growing mechanization of human existence, with individuals reduced to wheels and cogs in a soulless military-industrial machine.

And yet, while Stevenson’s argument explains the general preoccupation with clocks in modernist fiction, it is important to note that in *Mrs. Dalloway*, characters’ attitudes towards timepieces vary depending on their particular situation and social status. We can see this in a passage from Woolf’s novel that Stevenson discusses in the course of his argument:

Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, until the mound of time was so far diminished that a commercial clock, suspended above a shop in Oxford Street, announced, genially and fraternally, as if it were a pleasure to Messrs. Rigby and Lowndes to give the information gratis, that it was half-past one. (*Mrs. Dalloway* 112; see Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction* 134)

Stevenson is surely right in claiming that the hostility directed in this passage at the clocks of Harley Street is related to a critique of the status quo (“counselled submission, upheld authority”). However, what Stevenson does not discuss is that the value judgments at this point in Woolf’s novel are, in all likelihood, the narrator’s and Lucrezia Warren Smith’s, whereas other characters exhibit en-
tirely different attitudes towards mechanical timepieces. For instance, in the paragraph that immediately follows the passage quoted above, Hugh Whitbread – a pinnacle of respectability, and viewed by both Peter Walsh and Sally Seton as the embodiment of mindless conformism (7 and 79–80) – feels “gratitude” rather than hostility towards the clocks in Harley Street (112). Or, to give a second example, immediately after her husband’s suicide, even Lucrezia, hearing a clock striking the hour, thinks “how sensible the sound was; compared with all this thumping and whispering” (164). In moments of great emotional turmoil, an otherwise oppressive order may suddenly seem “sensible” and reassuring. Without denying the general validity of Stevenson’s observations, we nevertheless need to examine more closely when and why, precisely, Woolf’s characters react to timepieces in the way they do.

If we pay attention to the details of Woolf’s text, we find that, for Clarissa, clocks are problematic not as symbols of an oppressive social order, but for two rather different reasons: on the one hand they remind her of human mortality, and on the other they threaten to thwart her efforts to repress the reality of historical change. The former idea is made explicit early on:

[Clarissa] feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton’s face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered [...]. (32–33)

Lady Bruton’s face here becomes the dial of a clock that measures the (life-)time Clarissa has left. Of course, the idea that clocks are mementoes of human mortality is far from new and has long been central to the carpe diem theme (Stevenson 113). Yet for Clarissa, mechanical timepieces also symbolize more than

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25 In the paragraph that precedes the excerpt quoted above, Lucrezia Warren Smith is the focalizing agent, and it is at least plausible that she continues to be the focalizing agent (as there is no explicit indication of a change in perspective). Moreover, the language used in the excerpt echoes a passage that occurs a few pages earlier in Woolf’s novel, where the point of view at first seems to be associated exclusively with the omniscient narrator. The phrase “Rezia Warren Smith devined it,” however, which occurs in that passage, suggests that the narratorial perspective (including the narrator’s value judgments) is, if not identical with, then at least similar to Lucrezia’s; the point of view is both the narrator’s and Lucrezia’s. Given the parallels between that earlier passage and the excerpt quoted above, I would argue for a similar combination of narratorial and character focalization in the second passage.

26 See Paul K. Saint-Amour, who notes that “[s]ometimes clock time tyrannizes in Mrs. Dalloway,” but who also suggests that “oftener the striking of a clock is the occasion for linking or shuttling among characters” (89).