

Tracing Floral Responses: The Interplay between Human and Non-human Species in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*¹

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Abstract

The vegetal world is described in this research article as the interaction with critical plant studies that undermines the human-centric worldview. The main goal of this article is to reassess the nature of flowers by returning to the flowers themselves in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, which is oddly relevant to humankind. The novel's floral and human interactions with flowers have been analysed using Friedrich Nietzsche's "perspectivism" and Michael Marder's theoretical idea of "vegetal phenomenology." Regardless of human interference, Marder's notion guides the research towards the perception of flowers. Humans are not a prerequisite for the existence of flowers, which exist independently of humans. Nietzsche advocated perspectivism, which holds that all points of view are legitimate and that any dominant position ought to be disregarded. Multispecies ethnography, of course, is the analysis method that grants the species on Earth agency. The interaction between non-human and human species makes up the analytical framework. The two strings of the analytical thread are the floral replies, which ask how humans have benefited from flowers and how the flowers have manifested themselves in the presence or absence of humans. Multispecies ethnography, of course, is the analysis method that grants the species on Earth agency. This study suggests that viewing the world only with the human eye is a tedious and exhausting experience. Once more, adopting a floral perspective would elevate human epistemological standing. There would be a greater reservoir of floral knowledge, of course.

¹Cite this article as: Pantar, S. R. & Regmi, L. (2025). *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 8 (1), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/craiaj.v8i1.79902>

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Article history: Received on April 30, 2025; Accepted on May 22, 2025; Published on June 7, 2025.

Peer reviewed under the authority of CRAIAJ, academic journal of Ghodaghodi Multiple Campus, Kailali, Nepal, with ISSN 2717-4611 (Print) and ISSN 2717-462X (Online).

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Keywords: Back to flowers, Critical plant studies, Floral responses, Inversion, Vegetal life

Introduction

The opening sentence of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) draws the massive amount of attention of the scholars and critics engaged in critical plant studies as it reads, "Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (1993, p.1). She would love flowers so much that "she often went into her garden and got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her" (1993, p.217). This study piece explores the interaction between people and flowers in keeping with this portrayal. In particular, the examination of the floral spheres is taken into consideration because knowing, seeing, expressing, and portraying are not solely human capacities. Not only do humans have the capacity to know, but so do floral organisms, for that matter. The article aims to explain the reversal of traditional assessments of vegetal life in this regard.

The identification of vegetal life that challenges human dominance is known as critical plant research. Critical plant studies support human preferences for plants, much like critical animal studies do. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) by Michael Marder is a seminal work in this field. Concerning the privileged positions of humans, Marder maintains, "If animals have suffered the marginalization" "then non-human, non-animal living beings, such as plants, have populated the margin of the margin" "on the radars of our conceptualities" (2013, p. 2). Marder aspires for humans to take new paths in this regard, thinking and feeling as the vegetation would.

Literature Review

Themes like the influence of traditions, the identity of an artist, the interaction between the personal and the urban, and the experience of death are all prevalent in the relevant literature around *Mrs. Dalloway*, alongside, the consideration of being attentive to non-human beings, and also non-attentive to non-human beings has been deliberated on. Woolf meticulously analyses the significant role of tradition in influencing the characters' lives and aims to assert that Mrs. Dalloway is demanding on herself: "Mrs. Dalloway is finally a sympathetic picture of someone who has surrendered to the force of conventional life and permitted her emotions to go underground" (Zwerdling, 1977, p.78). Mrs. Dalloway exemplifies the prevailing belief in the importance of self-control, which suppresses authentic emotional expression and results in erratic emotional displays. "The fundamental action of Mrs. Dalloway is to elucidate the mechanisms of Clarissa's

thoughts and actions and to chart the ways in which her existence profoundly controverts the ideology and power relations of her cultural sphere. Critical appraisals of the novel have recognized Clarissa's identity as an artist (Littleton, 1995, p.36). Further, "central to this exploration is the interplay between personal meaning and the urban landscape of London, which Woolf employs not merely as a backdrop but as a dynamic force influencing the characters' inner lives and existential quests" (Khan and Ali, 2024, p.19). In addition, "My argument is that in Mrs Dalloway, Septimus and Clarissa are depicted as singular, exposed beings who are, thus, open to an experience of death, and hence, of community, that departs from the traditional and official one" (Lopez, 2024, p.174). One of Mrs. Dalloway's characters does not exhibit the same level of awareness towards the non-human species that surround him, despite Clarissa's constant attention to them, especially the many flowers and plants. Peter acts as Clarissa's antithesis. Whereas Clarissa lives in the present, Peter does not. Peter lives in the past, and is absorbed by the regret (Godleski, 2024, p.80). Not only these dominant themes, the novel has drawn the analysis of the flowers as symbols, the several facets of Virginia Woolf's use of imagery continue to spark scholarly controversy, as pictures constitute a fundamental component of her style and composition (Rychen, 1982, p. 11).

Materials and Methods

In a genre called Critical Plant Studies, Vegetal phenomenology refers to the notion of attributing greater values to the lives of plants. This strand of phenomenology considers: "plants are capable, in their own fashion, of accessing, influencing" "that corresponds to the vegetal modes of dwelling on and in earth" that is free from "human lebenswelt" (Marder, 2013, p. 8). The actions of the flowers are examined in this article using vegetal phenomenology. Specifically, how they present themselves, behave, and plan to engage with the human species. Humans have interpreted the flowers' immobility as their limitations in the same way that humans' incapacity to fly is not viewed as a constraint, vegetative phenomenology begs us to interpret this concept differently.

Instead of being compared to humans, plants must be understood in their own right. In that sense, this branch of phenomenology encourages us to observe the huge cosmos from vegetal perspectives and perform bracketing. Plants have many, if not all, of the characteristics of humans. They can communicate with both humans and animals, have memories, and can adjust to different climates and temperatures much like people.

Vegetal phenomenology, thus, questions the reductionist approach of human (too human) readings of plants. Indeed, the complexities and magnitude of the plant world, is perhaps richer than the human world as they may not be existing merely to meet the human needs. Nietzsche's "perspectivism is often construed as implying that there is a thing that can be validly grasped from different perspectives, and is thus independent of any particular perspective" (Hoy, 1986, p. 28). Multispecies ethnography is "methodological implementation" of "relations between humans" and "nature" (Ameli, 2023, p. 49).

Flowers and Humans: Back to the Flowers

The roses are vibrant and upright. They are burning by themselves. Their presence enhances the existence of human beings. The blossoms possess intrinsic value. Clarissa's husband presents flowers rather than gold, believing that flowers surpass gold in value. In seasons when they typically wouldn't grow, Clarissa could cultivate the blossoms. These chosen examples and supporting data show that flowers are superior to everything else and that they are capable of existing alone. Even in the presence of people the activities of flowers suggest how they exist independently. Sometimes an attempt is made to separate humans from flowers in order to draw this conclusion. Nevertheless, the attempt appears smudged and hazy.

The flowers at Mulberry's florist on Bond Street provide solace to Mrs. Dalloway, "the roses looked" "fresh" "like frilled linen clean from a laundry laid in wicker trays" (p. 12) "dark and prim the red carnations, holding their heads up; and all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale" (p. 12) "it was the moment between six and seven when every flower- roses, carnations, irises, lilac-glows; white, violet, red, deep orange; every flower seems to burn by itself, softly, purely in the misty beds" (p. 12).

As "flower shop in the sunlight" (p. 16) while Dalloway was coming out of Mulberry's florist and standing by it in the sunlight- Mrs Dalloway brought the wears of queen in her "the extreme dignity" (p. 16) in her face. When a florist's flowers are exposed to sunlight instead of shadow, they display their extraordinary beauty and elevate people's dignity, like Mrs. Dalloway's. When sunshine is present, the flowers and other organisms that get their energy from photosynthesis stay more active. The increased attractiveness is the result, "and made them swim on the top of water in bowls. The effect was extra-ordinary- coming in to dinner in the sunset" (p. 36). Mrs. Dalloway's

friend Peter Walsh has ideas for reducing social inferiority. His unique methods for reducing his mistakes and social inadequacy are the internal processes that go on inside his head. The roses splatter on his face, obscuring his eyesight. For humans, flowers and their activities are incredibly beneficial and potent, “the visions” “are dashed in his face like bunches of roses” (p. 63). They were completely content when they arrived at Hampton Court. Septimus Warren Smith, who frequently feels guilty about his life, appears content when he is around other people, especially when the flowers are floating like lamps on the grass. Septimus had to see the flowers as flowers, but he was unable to do so since he lacked the sense of proportion. This example illustrates that flowers are still flowers regardless of how people view them, even when they are not considered flowers, “All the little red and yellow flowers were out on the grass, like floating lamps” (p. 73) Septimus, despite the efforts by the flowers in raising the hopes of Septimus, they are not able to do so. He has the consciousness of guilt in him because of his involvement in the war and the crimes there. He often talks to people around him that they should kill them “and roses hang about him- the thick red roses which grow on my bedroom wall, he reminded himself” (p. 76). Richard wanted Clarissa to know that his love was still there. He believed that the flowers were expressing the continuation of his love for Clarissa, and he was unable to express it with the gold. He wasn't an unbeliever. Despite their occasional miscommunications, he was her lover. However, she took his flowers and remarked, "How lovely." Without his words, she was able to comprehend his Clarissa. She placed them on the mantelpiece in vases. How beautiful they appeared! "She said" (p. 132).

Clarissa could plant flowers even in the time and places that would not be possible, she is a snob, but has capacities. “and what was the other thing – plants, hydrangeas, syring as, very very rare hibiscus lilies that never grow north of the Suez Canal, but she, with one gardener in a suburb near Manchester, had beds of them, positively beds!” (p. 215).

Humans and Flowers: Flowers as human essentials

This section deliberates on the inevitable need of human beings particularly, the flowers as the essential of human beings. To articulate, human beings' identity is questionable in the absence of the flowers. Inversely, humans do not find pleasure in the absence of the flower. Miss Pym, the woman who worked at the Mulberry's florist in the Bond Street, attended her client, Mrs. Dalloway. She “breathed in the earthy garden sweet smell” (p.

12) .With her eyes partly closed, she snuffled in as she swung her head back and forth among the roses, irises, and nodding tufts of lilac (p. 12).

For Miss Pym, the flowers were everything. Her greatest pleasure would be found in the company of the flowers. She closes her eyes half and snuffs in the fragrance of the flowers. This renders her the ecstasy. She is absorbed in the jocund company of the flowers as Wordsworth was lost in the company of the daffodils. Wordsworthian daffodils and their dancing can be equated to the experience of Miss Pym for whom the accompaniment by the flowers is the supreme experience.

When among the flowers in the florist's Mrs Dalloway felt that she was "the queen" "thought Mrs Dalloway, coming out of Mulberry's with her flowers" " she wore a look of extreme dignity by the flower shop in the sunlight" (p. 16). This signifies that the existence of the flowers adds the beauty in the lives of the human beings. It also means that flowers have special support to the human beings. They contribute to the value of the human beings. They are the inevitable instruments to the ends of human beings' pleasures. As Andrew Marvell in his poem *The Garden* relates, a human struggles throughout the life merely for a garland that signifies his victory, one need not wander for the laurels because the garden offers so many flowers that can be woven into the garlands. This parallel can be drawn with the entering of Mrs Dalloway who feels the royal presence when she is among the flowers. This feeling of being queen can be understood as the valuing of the floral aesthetics. A character called Shawled Moll Pratt " with her flowers on the pavement wished the dear boy well" " and would have tossed the price of a pot beer- a bunch of roses – into St. James's Street" (pp. 18-19) reminds the value of roses. The roses are taken as the instruments for the wishes. If someone were to wish the best, possessing the flowers alongside would have added the virtue and strength in the act of wishing. This has happened with Shawled Moll Pratt who has wished her boy with the roses and accomplished her intentions. Contrarily, it was not merely with the decorative dimensions of the flowers that the characters engaged themselves in, they enjoyed even cutting the heads of the flowers that the other characters found brute, " Sally went out, picked hollyhocks, dahlias – all sorts of flowers that had never been seen together- cut their heads off" (36) " Aunt Helena thought it wicked to treat flowers like that" (36). Despite the feelings of Aunt Helena, Sally enjoyed the act of cutting the heads of various flowers. Although interpreted differently, the common thread of interpretation is that Sally enjoys the activities with the flowers. The company of flowers provides

pleasure to her. Further, when Sally “picked a flower” from urn. Aunt Helena felt that the “whole world might have been turned upside down!” (p. 38) This feeling can be taken in two levels of interpretations- one that Aunt found herself to be awful. The other, Sally would create a scenario that would be beautiful out of the cutting of the flowers. After all, the making of the garlands too takes place only when one cuts the flowers and weaves them with the help of threads. In addition, some characters such as Mrs Dempster take that despite having the company of flowers such as roses, their life has not been happy enough. In general, it was supposed that one would be very happy when one is with the flowers. This line of assumption can be taken as the reminder of the flowers and the life. The life was understood to be full of happiness and the beauty only when one has taken shelter in the company of the flowers. In fact, this has not happened with the life of Mrs Dempster., “For it’s been a hard life, thought Mrs Dempster. What hadn’t she given to it? Roses; figure; her feet too” “Roses, she thought sardonically” (p. 28). Her sardonic thoughts are the ironical portrayals of her life: people expect life to be beautiful when one is associated with the flowers. Nonetheless, this has not happened with her. In the society that Woolf describes, position and power could be fathomed along with the presence and the parameters of the floral company or possession, “Lady Bruton went ponderously” (p. 124) “there were the rats” “the beds of dahlias, the hollyhocks” “power was hers, position, income” (p. 125). Whether or not one is powerful can be understood in terms of one’s possession of floral contents. Lady Bruton was powerful because she had the beds of the flowers such as dahlias and hollyhocks.

The happy occasions of a person were characterized by the possession of flowers, not only they marked the power and positions, “But who was this Rossetter? He wore two camellias on his wedding day” (p. 212). Presumably, others wore only one camellia while Rossetter wore two. It marks his additional privilege. His privileged position is marked by his added beauty by his flowers in the wedding day. The daughter of Mrs Dalloway is compared with hyacinth, Elizabeth was “like a hyacinth” (p. 213). This comparison has a reasoned choice. This stands for the maturity of Elizabeth. She is grown up now. Her mother makes this comparison to mean that she is serious and withdrawn now rather than exhibiting the childish behaviors. Woolfe’s theme of realization can be associated with the coming-of-age of Elizabeth.

Conclusion

By examining the floral responses, a study that considers the vitality of vegetality is produced. Seeing human world through the eyes of flowers contributes to the knowledge that both non-human and human species have. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway's* is analyzed through vegetal phenomenology, perspectivism, and multispecies ethnography that present the idea that flowers are capable of seeing the world in their own unique way and that attempts to put them in a submissive role are merely the result of a human-centric epistemology. The evidences from the text have evidently supported the assertion that the plants are capable of standing on their own regardless of the presence of human species.

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