

“The Hours” Is About Moments: A Film Review

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The Hours opens, reaches its apex, and ends in suicide. Still, it is a cinematic celebration of life, not death. The film is based on Michael Cunningham’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel of the same name (Cunningham, 1998), which was, in turn, based on Virginia Woolf’s (1925) novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Woolf described her writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* as “a devil of a struggle” (Bell, 1972, p. 100). She wished to create a work that would portray the “true reality” of “life and death, sanity and insanity”, as well as “criticize the social system, and ... show it at work, at its most intense” (Bell, pp.99-100). In another diary entry, Woolf described how, largely through stream-of-consciousness writing, she dug out “beautiful caves” of memory, thoughts, and feelings that exposed her characters’ “humanity, humour, depth.” She went on to say, “The idea is that the caves shall connect, & each comes to daylight at the present moment” (Woolf, 1923, p. 263 as quoted in Showalter, 2000, p. xxviii).

The moments Woolf created in her novel shimmer like the old fashioned artificial icicles that used to hang on indoor Christmas trees: from one angle they sparkled and shone; from another angle, they were leaden. In rendering a single day in the seemingly un-heroic life of an upper class woman who was preparing to host a party, Woolf focussed

on a character whose actions could at one moment appear admirable and, the next, trivial. It was this flux of experience, seen from different points of view, that Woolf captured. It was also the fleeting moments of connection with others that she celebrated, and the ambiguous role women played in occasioning moments of connection that she puzzled over. Woolf, presaging her own death, dared to present the notion that one has the right to chose “not to live” when the connections are no longer possible. The film, *The Hours*, like Cunningham’s novel, is masterfully faithful to Woolf’s vision.

The Hours presents us with a single day in the lives of not one, but three twentieth century women. Clarissa Vaughn (Meryl Streep) is the modern-day embodiment of the figure of Mrs. Dalloway. She is a successful contemporary New York book editor whose life and psyche are enmeshed with those of her one-time lover, the prize-winning poet Richard (Ed Harris). On the day we see her, Clarissa is preparing to host a party for Richard, who has been awarded a prestigious prize for his poetry.



Richard has bestowed the name of “Mrs. Dalloway” upon Clarissa, not only because she shares the first name of Woolf’s character, but because, like her namesake, she spends much of her time organizing and hosting social events. Richard is dying of AIDS, and Clarissa passes much of her day either actually caring for him or carrying him in her mind, to the extent that she fails to cherish other aspects of her life, including her present relationship with her lover, Sally (Alison Janney). Clarissa feels most alive when she is with Richard, but can be suddenly catapulted from assurance into despair when Richard brings his poet’s scrutiny to bear upon her life. Streep’s performance is suitably unsettling: We are not sure what to think of her as she

vacillates between genuine
excitement about her party and
self-doubt.

Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), a fragile, bookish, young woman, is perhaps the most tragic figure of the film. In a Los Angeles suburb in 1951, Laura tries to live the roles of mother to her young son (Jack Rovello) and wife to Dan (John C. Riley). Moore is remarkable in her ability to convey, mainly through facial expressions, the relief of fleeting moments when Laura feels herself settle into the conditions of her life and then to register Laura's despair when she cannot sustain her contentment. Laura longs mostly to retreat to her bed to read *Mrs. Dalloway*. Eventually she considers suicide as her only escape from a world where she is so ill at ease. Laura's actions are accompanied by the heartbreaking, mute gaze of her child: He can feel his mother slipping further and further away like a drowning swimmer who is just beyond the grasp of rescue.

The film's third central female character is Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman). In the years following World War I and her most recent bouts of mental illness, Virginia has been "confined" to the relative calm of Richmond, a London suburb. On the day we see her, Virginia anticipates the arrival of her sister, her niece, and her nephews for tea, while she struggles to write her novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*. Virginia longs for the city life her novel depicts and that her sister inhabits, even though she knows that the frenzy of London would undermine her mental equilibrium.

The film moves skillfully among the lives of the three women, using a variety of unifying techniques that rarely seem contrived. Laura Brown's longing for her bed, the view from above of Clarissa gazing up through the open hatch in the ceiling of the elevator car, the coffin-like apartment in which Richard lives, the garden walls that encase Virginia's path to the train station and passage to London, all echo the original Mrs. Dalloway's chaste, narrow bed. All speak of the isolation and stultifications that the film's three female characters struggle to overcome.

Roses also figure strongly among the unifying images of the film. Clarissa purchases "buckets of roses" for the party she is having in honour of Richard. We are torn between thinking that she has captured the true spirit of celebration, and feeling that she has displayed an outlandish extravagance that borders on hysteria. Laura's husband buys roses for his wife even though it is his own birthday, an act that Laura sees as another example of her own failure to provide. Virginia places roses on a funeral bier that her niece and nephews have built for a dead bird. The roses, in that they speak both of life and death in their

ephemeral beauty, are one of the most eloquent and most-of repeated visual symbols of the film.

All of *The Hours*' central characters share impassioned kisses with other women. Virginia kisses her vibrant sister, Vanessa (Amanda Richardson,) as the latter departs Richmond for London. Laura's attempt to comfort her ill neighbour (Toni Collete) turns into an intimate embrace, and Clarissa finally acknowledges her love for Sally with a hungry kiss. These scenes have attracted much attention from film critics simply because they have "lesbian content" (e.g. Burns, 2003; Ebert, 2002), but it is the underlying meaning of these moments of contact that is most important. The kisses portray, above all, the impulse to seize, hold onto, and drink deeply of the vitality of others' lives. No matter what orientation we bring to them, these moments may be inherently erotic.

Philip Glass's score, with its marked four-four time and its sparse rolling broken chords, suggests the relentless flow of time as each of the women moves through her day from waking, party preparations, alternating moments of joy and despair, and, finally, to sleep again. The music rises and modulates, like churning waves, as we see, in the often-silent faces of the characters, hints of what resides in their personal and private "caves."

And there are the characters who slip beneath the waves, or who retreat so deeply into the caves that they cannot re-emerge. Laura, we eventually learn, leaves her family to become a librarian and live among books in a far off city. Richard says that he is tired of "staying alive" for Clarissa and lets himself fall to his death from his apartment window. We know from the film's opening moments that Virginia, too, will eventually psychically and literally slip beneath the waves as insanity threatens to overtake her.

Like the film's Laura, Virginia is numbed by "the suffocating anesthetic of the suburbs." Unlike Laura, she does not wish to retreat from life, but, rather, entreats Leonard (Stephen Dillane) to allow her to once again feel "the jolt of the capital." The railway platform scene between Virginia and Leonard, where they argue about returning to live in London, contains some of the finest moments of the film. Kidman is stellar in her desperation, and Dillane's performance of Leonard's anguished acceptance of Virginia's choice to lead a life that will most likely kill her is heart-rending. We hear Woolf's own voice as much as that of the film's Virginia when the latter says, "You cannot find peace by avoiding life, Leonard." We know that Virginia does, indeed, pay the ultimate price for wanting to savour, rather than avoid life. Just as the shell-shocked war veteran, Septimus Smith, dies in Woolf's *Mrs.*

Dalloway, it is the ones for whom the moments of connection are too overwhelming, maddening, or simply finished who die in *The Hours*.

Few stories make the transition from the page to the screen so successfully as does *The Hours*. The movie's success is a testament to fine acting, Woolf's inspirational work, Cunningham's enthralling book, expert direction by Stephen Daldry, a fine script from David Hare, imaginative production design, and seamless editing. This is a finely crafted film worthy of viewing more than once.

As educators, we can take lessons from *The Hours*. The film teaches us humility, reminding us that each human being we meet possesses "a beautiful cave" of thoughts, feelings, and life experiences that we can only glimpse. Likewise, the film causes us to ponder our own dedication to fostering classroom and collegial relationships that truly welcome and draw individuals out of their solitude. We are reminded that lives and living are rarely straightforward, but are, rather, ambiguous. *The Hours* prompts us to consider the creative impulse that may be fed and sustained through the exploration of that ambiguity and to wonder what moments of beauty we may have missed in the drive to achieve mandated curricular outcomes. And, the fact that we can still hear the voice of Virginia Woolf through the layers of decades, Cunningham's book, and the film reminds us that art transcends time to add radiance to the moments of our lives inside and outside the classroom.

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