

BOOKS AND LIFE

Running through the stories of the three women's lives shown in "The Hours" is the novel "Mrs. Dalloway". If one looks at the three women we can see how the novel affects each of them:

VIRGINIA WOOLF – she is in the process of writing the novel.

LORNA – she is in the process of reading the novel.

CLARISSA – seems to be in the process of "re-living" the novel. Her friend Richard calls her Mrs. Dalloway and thus the novel must have had an important part in her life at some point.



TASK

1. Can you describe the effect of the novel on each of the three women?
2. How is the novel shown in each of the three stories?
3. Why should a novel, which shows a very ordinary day in the life of one woman (Mrs. Dalloway) be of such significance? If Mrs. Dalloway's day is "normal", then how does this differ from the day that all three women experience? In what ways is the day of significance to each of the three main characters?

Is it possible for one novel to have a key significance in one's life? Think about your own reading. Is there one novel that you think is important to you? What is it and why is it important?

Perhaps it is not a novel – it may be a film or a particular song. Again, think why this may be. What happened to you when you were reading the novel or were listening to a record or watching a film? Is it the events in your own life or is it something about the particular text which is significant to you?

Look back at your answers to the task above. Which of the three women's experience does yours come closest to?

We often search in books for reflections of our own lives. Which of the three women comes closest to this idea – a woman searching for answers to her own situation who finds answers in what she



reads? Or is it that when we write a story we are trying to put order into what one would call a confused life?

This raises the question of why we enjoy stories. Perhaps it is because they give structure to events which, if we lived through them, would not seem structured. Our lives, as we live them, often seem confused – there is not the ordered "beginning, middle and end" that we see in written and filmed narratives.

THE NARRATIVES

Key to the structure of "The Hours" is the relationship of the stories of the three women and how they relate to each other.

TASK

For each of the three women – Virginia, Lorna and Clarissa, write down what happens in their day.



BACKGROUND TO THE HOURS

As has been said, "The Hours" finds its inspiration in Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway". It is not necessary to have read "Mrs. Dalloway" in order to enjoy "The Hours" (either as a film or as a book). However, it is interesting to look at how Michael Cunningham and Stephen Daldry have used the original story in order to create their own novel and film.

TASK

Below is a short synopsis of the story of "Mrs. Dalloway". Firstly, read this and then look at the further tasks that follow it.



THE PLOT OF MRS DALLOWAY

The events of this novel take place in the course of one day.

The book begins with Clarissa Dalloway preparing to leave her house to buy flowers for her party. As she walks through the city, she remembers many things. She recalls a summer she had spent at her family's country home in Bourton, how she was 18 during the summer she refused to marry Peter Walsh. She had loved him, but marrying him would have been a mistake. The trouble was summed up in his attitude toward her parties. He had always criticised her for giving them, but she took them seriously. Walking to Bond Street she thinks of how her daughter, Elizabeth doesn't care to shop; she is distressed by the hold religious Miss Kilman has on her. At Mulberry's, the florists, she sees a car with drawn blinds blocking the street. Everyone thinks about who sits in the car; all believe that it must be an important person... In the crowd is a War veteran named Septimus and his Italian wife, Lucrezia. Septimus has been acting strange lately and has threatened suicide. The limousine approaches the gates of Buckingham Palace, where an anxious crowd has formed. Suddenly their attention is drawn to an airplane skywriting.

Everyone looks up and tries to read the writing, but the wind keeps breaking it up. In the park, Septimus also sees the skywriting, but he thinks it is a message to him from the dead. Septimus, Clarissa, and all passersby are linked by their thoughts on what the plane is writing.

Clarissa returns home to discover that her husband, Richard, has gone to lunch with Lady Millicent Bruton. She reflects on her marriage. She seems to lack passion. Yet, she has felt emotions, on occasion, for women. Thinking about Sally Seton, upon whom she had a crush, she takes the dress she plans to wear that night downstairs and has begun to mend it when she is interrupted by Peter. As they talk, both remember the summer she refused to marry him. Peter leaves when Elizabeth comes in, and he walks aimlessly through London reflecting and reminiscing as Clarissa has done that morning. He feels alternately empty (to be without Clarissa, forever) and free (to be, for the moment, alone and unknown in London). He sees an attractive young woman and pretends she cares for him. Then he falls asleep in Regent's Park and dreams of a solitary traveller and an elderly woman.

In the same park, Septimus and Rezia wait for their appointment with Sir William Bradshaw. Septimus thinks he sees his dead friend Evans, but it is only Peter. Peter wakes up confused and distraught. He had dreamed about an incident at Bourton when he and Clarissa had fought. Afterwards, he had found Clarissa talking to Richard Dalloway. Jealous, Peter had hurt her by calling her "a perfect hostess". Later, he had tried to win her back. When he finally proposed, Clarissa rejected him. He had fled to India; Clarissa had married Richard.

As Peter gets into a taxi, Septimus' past is revealed -- how he loved Shakespeare and Miss Isabel Pole, to whom he used to write poetry. After the war he married Rezia because he was afraid he could



not feel. He has been to see Dr. Holmes, a psychiatrist who he wants to escape. Sir William tells Rezia that Septimus simply needs a sense of proportion and he will place him in a home. Rezia is distraught because she does not want to be separated from her husband.

Hugh Whitbread brings Lady Bruton flowers at the lunch with Richard Dalloway where they are to help her draft a letter to "The Times" about emigration. Lady Bruton mentions that Peter is back in London. Suddenly, Richard decides that he must tell Clarissa that he loves her. Hugh and Richard leave together. He goes to her, bringing flowers, but he cannot say the words.

Septimus helps Rezia make a hat and she thinks everything will be all right. They are happy for that moment. She decides she will not let Septimus be taken to a home. When she gets up to pack she hears a noise of someone coming up to their rooms. It is Dr. Holmes. Septimus jumps from the window rather than being captured by "human nature".

Peter, going to his hotel, hears Septimus' ambulance and reflects on the wonders of civilisation. After dinner he walks to Clarissa's home for the party. He later regrets having come and Clarissa herself thinks her party will be a failure. Then Sally Seton, now Lady Rosseter, arrives at the party which now completes the gathering of those from Bourton thirty years earlier. The party begins to get better; the prime minister puts in an appearance. Clarissa is unhappy when Lady Bradshaw tells her about the suicide of Sir William's patient. She thinks about the young man in another room and realises that he was significant to her life. Sally and Peter sit together on a couch remembering the past. The party breaks up and Clarissa comes over to Peter who looks at her with a mixture of terror and ecstasy.

ACTIVITY 1

Firstly go back through the synopsis and underline which events from the novel are reflected in the story of "The Hours".

ACTIVITY 2

Looking at the events that you have underlined you should now try to decide which character's story they appear in – Virginia's, Lorna's or Clarissa's. It may be that some events occur in more than one of the three stories.

ACTIVITY 3

Look again at the synopsis of "Mrs. Dalloway". Have any of the events been slightly changed in "The Hours"? How and into what?



ACTIVITY 4

Which characters in "Mrs. Dalloway" seem to be reflected in characters in "The Hours"? How are they transformed?

ACTIVITY 5

It should be obvious that the events of the single day shown in "Mrs. Dalloway" are seen from a number of different perspectives. How is this reflected in "The Hours"?



VIRGINIA WOOLF ON MRS DALLOWAY

[Taken from "A Writer's Diary"]

14 OCTOBER 1922 Mrs. Dalloway has branched into a book; and I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide; the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side--something like that.

30 AUGUST 1923 I have no time to describe my plans. I should say a good deal about The Hours [which became Mrs. Dalloway], and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each come to daylight at the present moment.

15 OCTOBER 1923 I am stuffed with ideas for it. I feel I can use up everything I've ever thought. Certainly, I'm less coerced than I've yet been. The doubtful point is, I think, the character of Mrs. Dalloway. It may be too stiff, too glittering and tinselly. But then I can bring innumerable other characters to her support. I wrote the 100th page today. Of course, I've only been feeling my way into it--up till last August anyhow. It took me a year's groping to discover what I call my tunnelling process, by which I tell the past by installments, as I have need of it. This is my prime discovery so far.

19 JUNE 1923 I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity; I want to criticise the social system, and to show it at work at its most intense. . . . Am I writing The Hours from deep emotion? Of course the mad part tries me so much, makes my mind squirt so badly that I can hardly face spending the next weeks at it. It's a question though of these characters. People, like Arnold Bennett say I can't create, or didn't in Jacob's Room, characters that survive. My answer is--but I leave that to the Nation; it's only the old argument that character is dissipated into shreds now; the old post-Dostoevsky argument. I daresay it's true, however, that I haven't that "reality" gift. I insubstantise, wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality--its cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?

TASK

Look carefully at the comments made by Virginia Woolf about the process of creating "Mrs Dalloway".

Do any of the comments that she makes help us understand what is happening in "The Hours", both in the section about Virginia but also about the story as a whole?



CHARACTERS

One of the key elements of storytelling is the characters in the story. A novelist or filmmaker has to create believable and interesting characters in order to involve the reader/viewer in the story.

The major techniques used by writers and filmmakers to establish a character and to help us understand what type of person they are include:

- Physical description (including dress, looks, voice).
- Personality (friendly, happy etc).
- Actions of the character.
- Interaction with other characters.
- Comments on other characters.



Characters are essential to the movement of a story. As a story is a construction, everything within it should be relevant to its development. We can see that the actions, thoughts, words of any character are a vital element of the dynamic of a story.

There are three central characters in "The Hours" – Virginia Woolf, Lorna and Clarissa.

Firstly we want you to think about each character individually. For each of the three characters answer the following questions:

1. Describe the physical characteristics of the character.
2. Try to describe their personality.
3. What do we know about the background of the character?

Your answers will lead you to some general conclusions about each character. The next thing to look at is how you have come to understand this. For your answers to questions 2 and 3 try to think of moments within the film which illustrate the points you have made.



ACTIONS AND MOTIVATION

Having looked at the physical and personality aspects of the three characters we should now look at their motivation and also their actions in order to see how each character relates to the other, how the three stories and characters reflect and refract each other.



TASK

In the chart below you will be required to choose three key actions for each of the main characters. For each of these actions you should then try to say what each of them tells us about the character. Finally, you could think of the ways in which this particular action is reflected in the stories of the other two characters.

	WHAT THE ACTION TELLS US ABOUT THE CHARACTER	REFLECTION IN OTHER CHARACTERS
VIRGINIA WOOLF		
1
2
3
LORNA		
1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____
CLARISSA		
1	_____	_____
2	_____	_____
3	_____	_____



INTERACTION

Look back to your answers to the previous task. How many of the key actions of each character involved one of the other main characters? The key to the plot of "The Hours" is the relationship between the stories of Virginia Woolf, Lorna and Clarissa.

TASK

You will need now to consider how the stories interact with each other. Consider the relationship between the stories of Lorna and Clarissa, Virginia Woolf and Clarissa and Virginia and Lorna.



Finally, when you have tracked all three relationships, look to see how they are linked together, the ways in which the filmmakers have "sewn" together the three characters and stories.

MINOR CHARACTERS

So far we have only looked at the three main characters in the film. However we are also introduced to other characters – Clarissa's friend Richard, Lorna's husband, Virginia's husband and also her sister. Can you remember any other characters from the film?



TASK

You now need to think what these characters add to the overall narrative of the story. Why have they been included? How do they help move the stories along? How do the relationships that they have with the three central characters develop our understanding of these characters?



THEMES

We are now going to explore the ideas of themes within the story of "The Hours".

Work that you will have already completed will have given you some of the themes of the film – sanity and insanity, isolation, conflict. What other themes are there in the film?

TASK

In the chart below you should write down four of what you think are the themes of the film. Next to each theme you should try to write down at least two incidents from the film which illustrate that theme.

You might try to complete the chart three times, one for each of the three stories. Then you should compare them to see how they relate to each other.

THEME	INCIDENTS IN "THE HOURS"



STRUCTURES

The story of "The Hours" is in three related parts.

All of these events unfold with our knowledge, as the viewer, that Virginia dies as this is the opening sequence of the film. Thus we see her actions in her story, knowing what the final result will be. You will already have examined the ways in which the characters have interacted with each other and also the ways in which the themes of the story are presented to us.

When we look at the structure of the story we need to think about three things - the plot, the story and the narrative.

PLOT – these are the elements, which recur from story to story – in many ways these are the same as the genre conventions. These elements are the stuff from which the story will be made.

STORY – this is where the elements of the plot are structured into a sequence. In "The Hours" we have three stories which go to make up the overall story.

NARRATIVE – the way in which the story is actually told - the actual way in which it is filmed – the type of shots used, the use of music, the way that the film is edited together. If the story outline were written up as a novel then the narrative would be expressed in a different way through the choice of words and descriptions.

TASK 1

We have said that three stories go to make up an overall story. How would you describe the "overall" story of "The Hours"?

We now need to look at how this is translated into a developed narrative, how this narrative expresses the themes of the film, how "The Hours" uses conventions of genre to build up the narrative and finally how all of this is translated into film. You will need to have in front of you all of the work that you have completed so far so that you can use your findings to answer questions about the story structure.



TASK 2

Draw a chart with three columns. In the first column, log all of the key moments of the film which fit into each story section. Then in the next column, say how each section of the narrative reveals something about the characters. Finally in the third column, describe the themes that are shown in each of the story sections.

Once you have completed the chart you should then try to trace through the narrative the various developments which take place both of characters and themes. Looking at your chart, can you see any relationships between the themes and certain characters?

Can you see the ways in which certain of the narrative events are linked, the ways in which one action causes another action to happen? How does this relate to the ways in which a certain character is shown to us? What you are doing here is looking at the way in which both Michael Cunningham (in "The Hours") and Virginia Woolf (in "Mrs. Dalloway") have structured the basic story and how the filmmakers have taken the novel and translated it into a filmed narrative.

