

PARALLELS AND RELATIONSHIPS

TIME

"The Hours" deals with three women's lives – their lives shown through what happens to each of them during one day. This follows the pattern of the novel "Mrs. Dalloway".

But it is not quite as simple as that. Both the film and novel begin with the suicide of Virginia Woolf. In the introductory scene of the film, there is a play on time – we see Virginia walking towards the river whilst the film cuts back in time to the moment when she is writing her final letter to her husband, Leonard.



At the end of the film we cut back to Virginia standing in the river before she drowns. So we are almost back to the beginning of the film again.

The film is based around this interplay of time – moving from one period to another, allowing us to compare and contrast the lives of the three women, but the three stories are framed by Virginia's suicide.

Why do you think that both the filmmaker and the author of the novel "The Hours" chose to start with Virginia Woolf's suicide? How does this affect the way in which we understand the rest of the story?



POINTS IN TIME

The lives of the three women that we see in "The Hours" take place in very specific moments in time and in very different social situations.

TASK

In the chart below, try to describe each character, give details about their social standing and describe the relationships that they are in.

	DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTER	SOCIAL STANDING	RELATIONSHIPS
VIRGINIA WOOLF			
LORNA			
CLARISSA			



Once you have done this, is it possible to make any comparisons between the three women? Do their different "days" and experiences suggest anything about the ways in which women's lives have changed over the past eighty odd years?

Virginia and Laura are both, in a sense, prisoners of their time and societies, and both long for freedom from this imprisonment. Clarissa Vaughan, on the other hand, apparently enjoys every liberty: freedom to be a lesbian, to come and go and live as she likes. Yet she has ended up, in spite of her unusual way of life, as a fairly conventional wife and mother. What might this fact indicate about the nature of society and the restrictions it imposes? Could one say that character, to a certain extent, is destiny?



STITCHING - STRUCTURE

"The Hours" moves through three different stories, linking each visually as well as thematically. In his comments about the film, author Michael Cunningham makes the following observation:

"When you see the movie, look for the unifying gestures that are common to all three stories, not just flowers and cooking but more subtle bits of business. Everyone cracks an egg, everyone loses a shoe. It is just this sort of invisible stitching on which narrative stands."

TASK 1

Using Cunningham's idea of stitching the narrative together we first of all need to think of what visual elements recur within the story and then ask why and how they affect our understanding of what is happening.



To start with, let's look at the idea and action of the cracking of the egg.

In the chart on page 23 we have given an example of how we could approach this task. There are three key questions which we need to ask about each appearance of this action which we have put down in the column headings. Notice how we have then answered these questions for the character of Virginia. You should try to complete the sections for the other characters.

Once you have completed this task for the "cracking of the egg" you should then, in groups, try to think of as many other actions and events which recur in all three stories. Once you have come up with your list you should then repeat the exercise that you have carried out on the "egg" action with at least two other events. (A blank chart has been provided on page 24.)

If you are working on this in groups, then it would be useful for each group to choose a different thread in order to get as wide a range of actions and events as possible.

TASK 2

Once you have analysed the various threads which are "stitched" together, you should then look at whereabouts in the story each of the threads appears. Does one particular "action" appear in all three sections of the story at the same time or are there gaps – timelapses – between some of them? In order to complete this you will need to look back at your viewing notes.

How do all of the threads come together, particularly at the end of the film?



CHARACTER	WHERE THE ACTION TAKES PLACE	POINT IN STORY AND ACTION	WHAT IT TELLS US ABOUT CHARACTER
VIRGINIA	In the Kitchen	Virginia has gone down to the servant's kitchen and is telling the cook that she needs to go to London to buy ginger and tea. The cook is not best pleased but Virginia pushes her on the point. Whilst they talk, the cook breaks eggs as she makes a pie. Virginia watches the cook as she does this.	It is obvious that Virginia is not a practised cook herself. There is obviously tension between Virginia and her servants, as we have seen in their conversation before Virginia arrives in the kitchen. Virginia is at first hesitant about confronting the cook but eventually plucks up courage to do so. It is her triumph. Also, the look on her face as she watches the cook prepare the pie is one of disgust. The events tell us a lot about Virginia's social standing.
LAURA			
CLARISSA			



CHARACTER	WHERE THE ACTION TAKES PLACE	POINT IN STORY AND ACTION	WHAT IT TELLS US ABOUT CHARACTER
VIRGINIA			
LAURA			
CLARISSA			



STORY TELLING

The film "The Hours" differs from many other films that we see in that it tells three stories from different times, cutting between each. The novel of the same name from which it was adapted also uses this technique, one story cutting into another.

In the novel, the sequence of Virginia, Lorna and Clarissa seems to be a fairly set sequence. The film does not necessarily follow this, sometimes spending time on two characters before moving back to the third.

One key point to bear in mind is the way that the story is told. In both the novel "The Hours" and in Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" we are quite often placed within the minds of the characters – we read their thoughts and observations.

Let us first look at some of the techniques that Virginia Woolf uses in "Mrs. Dalloway".

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE - captures the private thoughts of her characters, allowing the reader insight into each character's mind. The narrative leaves one mind and enters another. We seem to get an overall consciousness of events, not that of one single mind.

Since the narrator's mind is dependent on the character's mind, this allows the reader to follow the minds of the characters. Most often in "Mrs. Dalloway", external objects are introduced as a means of transition from the mind of one character to another.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS - Woolf uses this to allow the reader to receive everything- the reader momentarily enters the character's consciousness.

OMNISCIENT NARRATOR - Achieves unity and cohesion which the character, Clarissa Dalloway, lacks. Big Ben is utilised as an interruption in the process of life.

Thus, there are three identifiable times Woolf wants us to recognise as integral to the structure of the novel: The past of the narrators, the time of Clarissa's youth, and the time of this single day in June.

The idea of there being three specific times is one that is used in "The Hours" – although in a slightly different way. However, we need to look at the challenges that a filmmaker faces when trying to adapt a novel for the screen which uses storytelling techniques which are difficult to film.

TASK

Look at the descriptions of the three narrative styles used in "Mrs. Dalloway". For each one think how they could be translated into film. What approaches would the filmmaker have to adopt?

You can take this one stage further by getting a copy of "Mrs. Dalloway" and also a copy of the novel, "The Hours" and take a small section of text from each. Think how you would film those sections.



BETWEEN/AMONG TEXTS

As you will already have seen, the film "The Hours" is an adaptation of Michael Cunningham's book "The Hours". This book takes, as its influence, Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway" (which had, as a working title "The Hours"). In addition, because of Virginia Woolf's appearance in the novel "The Hours", Cunningham also drew on other texts – Woolf's letters, diaries and various biographies.

Stephen Daldry's film thus draws on all of these references. There are certain moments in the film (for example the removal van in Lorna's story) which refer to the novel "Mrs. Dalloway" but do not refer to the novel "The Hours".

So far, so complex!

What we also need to add to the mix is our own understanding of the film. You will already have seen from your work on the trailer to the film that certain ideas about the story are given. Also, we are given information about who is in the film – key information about the stars of the film. Two names in particular stand out – Meryl Streep and Nicole Kidman.

What do you understand by these two names? What films have they been in? What sort of roles do you expect them to play? Whilst they are actresses they also bring expectations about the story that we will see on the screen.

Finally, the film has been produced by a Hollywood company – Miramax. Thus it is a Hollywood product. What do we as an audience expect from a Hollywood film? How would we expect it to tell its story?

When we come to watch "The Hours" all of these influences come into play.

You will have looked at the trailer for the film "The Hours". This will have raised your expectations about the story of the film but it may not have given you many ideas about how the story would be told.

Whilst one can enjoy the film "The Hours" without having read either of the two novels, or knowing anything about Virginia Woolf's life, the many layers which are built into the filmic text refer back to and inform the film that you are watching.

