

Shine Bright LLCE Cycle Terminal

Snapfile 14 The Hours

Reading The Hours p. 166

The Hours tells the story of three different women. One of them is Virginia Woolf writing Mrs. Dalloway; one of them is a woman, around 1949, I believe, who is reading Mrs. Dalloway; she's a housewife; and one of them is a modern-day character who in many ways plays the same role as the character in Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa Dalloway. Though he did make every effort to get the story of Virginia Woolf correct, this is a novelized version of her life – it's not a biography. It fits the story, but it does get at a lot of the themes that were in her life and that she was expressing in Mrs. Dalloway and her own battle with mental illness. The housewife, Mrs. Brown, who's reading Mrs. Dalloway is really stuck in normal typical gender roles, and she's really straining against the life that she didn't really choose for herself, and reading Mrs. Dalloway is challenging all of that and making it really hard to continue living this life that she just didn't want and there's a modern-day character Clarissa who's really not Mrs. Dalloway but, since her name is Clarissa, she just goes by that for the sake of a friend of hers and she does, in many ways, live out the same story as Mrs. Dalloway but, in many ways, totally flipped because she had that opportunity being of modern-day. The Hours borrows both the time structure of Mrs. Dalloway – everything takes place in one single day and the life of each woman – and also plays with the stream-of-consciousness storytelling that was so interesting and so innovative in Mrs. Dalloway this book was so interesting to read especially someone who really enjoyed Mrs. Dalloway and wanted to spend more time with those characters and see them pushed in different directions.

Virginia Woolf's literary style p. 167

Rather than have the omniscient narrator of 19th-century fiction and Edwardian fiction, Woolf thought that the narrative should be managed by multiple perspectives. There's not one all-knowing narrator, there are several different points of view in the story, and that's why it was very important for her to have her characters not only see but be seen. You have to look at them from a number of points of view. She needed to show what she calls "psychological notation". What is the interior reality? What is happening inside as people see the world, as they live in it with their own memories, fantasies, projections, associations, and as they are perceived by the people they encounter?

Clarissa by Virginia Woolf p. 169

Melvin Bragg: Can you give us a brief overview of the novel and its main events?

Kathryn Simpson: As you already mentioned it's a novel set on a single day in June in 1923 and is called *The Hours*. In many ways, it's a special day. It's the day of Clarissa Dalloway's party, but it's also an ordinary day – and Woolf gives us snapshots of London streets and parks where we see a cross-section of ordinary people just going about their daily business. The focus on the richness and importance of the everyday, I think is something that resonates throughout Woolf's writing and we're certainly made alert to sensation and the qualities of being alive throughout *Mrs. Dalloway*. The plot is very minimal; Woolf was moving away from realist conventions which very much were formed around plots and were very much plot-driven and in terms of summarizing the novel, it's probably best to think about the different groups of characters. Clarissa is an upper-class woman who will host a party...

Melvin Bragg: Clarissa Dalloway.

Kathryn Simpson: Clarissa Dalloway, that's right, who will host a party for many influential guests, including the prime minister...

Melvin Bragg: On that day.

Kathryn Simpson: On that very day...

Melvin Bragg: She leaves the house to get the flowers for the party in the evening."

Kathryn Simpson: "Absolutely, that's right. So she heads out into the city to buy the flowers in some ways that, that purchase is really a pretext to go walking.

Melvin Bragg: But about the way she portrays her characters... What's novel about that? I mean we've been told about *Mrs. Dalloway*. Is there a way that she draws a character? You could say Dickens draws a character very often by exaggeration, hyperbole. Is there a way that you can say Virginia Woolf describes her characters?

Kathryn Simpson: "Yes, well, I think again that she's very clearly moving away from a realist tradition where characters are narrated from an external perspective, where we're told about the hair colour, their status, we're told the material details. What we

get in Woolf is a preoccupation with the inner life and that's why it's so fluid, that's why it's so contradictory, because she was very alert to the fact that we are constantly shifting and changing. Our moods, our emotions, our thoughts, are in constant flux.

Going further p. 170

Michael Cunningham: I was sitting there in my studio thinking about Virginia Woolf and Mrs. Dalloway and I suddenly had this image of my mother. I thought, you know, “Mom, what are you doing in my hallucination?”

[laugh]

And, as I thought about it, I thought about how my mother was a homemaker and a wife, and, and and it was a life that was too small for her. I don't know, I don't think if the life is categorically too small for anybody, but it wasn't - it wasn't right for her. But she couldn't break out of it and so she became, she was obsessive about everything. Those cocktail napkins she'd spent all day buying turned out to be wrong, and she had to take them back the next day and she really would bake a cake and throw it out and start another cake. And I always thought of her as a sort of Amazon queen captured and made to live in an enclosure in which she couldn't move. And the more I thought about it, the more I thought, “Okay, take Virginia Woolf, and take my mother. Remove the end product. One of them is working on what will prove to be a great work of literature, the other is trying to bake a cake so perfect that it banishes sorrow.” The book technically matters more than the cake. Though a cake matters, yeah I mean no disrespect to cakes.

[laugh]

But I thought, if you take that away, and just look at these two women's individual desires to transcend what they can do, to do more than that they're technically capable of doing. My mother gets to be in the book just as surely as Virginia Woolf does, and there she was. And then suddenly it was these three parts and it felt like it could go.