

Dalloway and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* and the screen adaptation of the same name, paint a stark vision of human existence. The film opens with its central image and theme: Virginia's suicide. The spectre of suicide established, playwright David Hare returns to it repeatedly, placing the most extended reflections of it symmetrically in all three storylines.

Virginia's prose style and her turbulent presence is the soul of the movie. Indeed it seems that all three women are aspects of that same soul. In 1923, Virginia's crystalline intellect fearfully awaits and rages against an encroaching plague of depression that will rob her of her sense. Nearly three decades later, Laura Brown, portrayed by Julianne Moore, feels every bit as trapped as Virginia. She appears tranquilised, drugged by loneliness and her despair is as haunting as Virginia's single-minded walk to self-annihilation. Finally, Meryl Streep encapsulates the sad life of Clarissa Vaughan, a present-day book editor who seems to have everything from a sperm-donated daughter to an openly gay relationship that was denied her predecessors. But Clarissa is not happy either. She mourns the one lost moment of happiness that binds her to her former lover, the dying Richard Brown, played by Ed Harris.

In order to re-enforce the ties between the stories, the director Stephen Daldry employs overlapping editing, where a scene in one time period often transposes seamlessly into a scene in another. Gestures and motifs echo, ricochet and repeat: all three women wake up on the right side of their bed, they do their hair, wash their face and then Virginia settles down in her armchair to write the opening sentence of her novel: Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. In Manhattan Clarissa decides to buy some flowers and in a suburb of L.A. Laura receives flowers from her husband. Parallelism is a significant aspect of Daldry's approach, so much so that there are times when it seems forced and overdone, for example, does it mean something when eggs are portentously cracked in all three periods?

The alternating stories occur over the span of a single day, much as was the case in *Mrs Dalloway*. All three women are interpreted together as the soul of the fictional character Mrs Dalloway. Together they decline and the inference is that the disappearance of one means the disappearance of the others.

Virginia Woolf takes her two soul mates on an exciting roller coaster and as we go along with them, we learn that even she does not know if they will plunge into destruction or



The Hours: Paramount Pictures

The sound of silence

see a new morning. Just like in *Mrs Dalloway*, there is little action in the movie but much movement in time from present to past and back again through the characters' memories. Movement in time is a trademark of the Psychodrama and such devices as streams of consciousness justify the retelling of the

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traumatic event in each individual's life. So Clarissa keeps returning to the moment when as an eighteen year old she kissed Richard, and Laura's story keeps referring to the time when the war-veteran chose her as his wife.

Virginia Woolf argued in her lifetime that other realistic English novelists dealt with surfaces but in order to go underneath the surface one must use less restricted forms of the presentation of life, such as the stream of consciousness and interior monologue, and one must abandon linear narrative. *The Hours* picks up on Virginia's poetic style and challenges us with the kind of bewilderingly non-linear structure that has been largely

abandoned by mainstream Hollywood since the 1970s. A relatively ordinary day with seemingly insignificant moments like the preparations for a birthday and a party, are set in stark contrast with a past moment of seemingly tremendous consequence, where life decisions are made and future paths are chosen.

By juxtaposing the present experience with flashbacks, the film-makers create a number of remarkable tensions that in many ways define the theme of death and what it means to choose life. Exactly how Laura Brown connects to the Clarissa story and the identity of her son, is thrillingly revealed in a single deft image. The young Richie screams behind the window in his babysitter's house for his mother who returns from her suicide attempt. This memory brings tears to the dying Richard as he awaits Clarissa's return to his apartment.

Both women, Clarissa and Laura, struggle to find a way of life and Virginia finally sets her followers free when, instead of killing her fictitious character Mrs Dalloway, she herself, 'the visionary', continues alone along the road to self-destruction.

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