

# Mrs dalloway and the hours: themes and symbols

[Life](#), [Love](#)



The corresponding themes and symbols of an appropriation encourage readers to re-examine the original text. This is evident in the novel *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, and the appropriation *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham. When someone reads *The Hours* they recognise the universality of the themes explored in the novel, which persuades them to return to the original work in order to discover how the same themes have been examined in a different context. Likewise, a desire to better understand the use of symbols in the appropriation provokes readers to trace them back to their origins in *Mrs Dalloway*. Moreover, the simple structure of *The Hours* makes Michael Cunningham's novel accessible to a wide audience. This equips more readers with the insight required to approach the challenging style of Virginia's novel. Two universal themes explored in the 1990's novel *The Hours* are death and love. Death in the novel is overwhelmingly portrayed as an escape from the struggles and trials of life. This is evident in the prologue where Virginia Woolf, an early 20th century English writer, commits suicide. The alliteration " she appears to be flying, a fantastic figure, arms outstretched" demonstrates how death has liberated Mrs Woolf from the destructive cycle of her " terrible disease". This attitude can also be seen in the contemplative tone of " it might feel so free: to simply go away" which displays Laura's calm acceptance of death as an escape from the monotony of her domestic duties. The reader perceives the pertinence of death and is provoked to respond to the attitude towards death portrayed in the novel. The second theme apparent in *The Hours* is love and in particular sexuality. The novels undisguised exploration of lust and diverse sexual expressions reflects the sexual freedom of the late 20th Century context.

The alliteration "Louis the farm-boy fantasy, the living embodiment of lazy-eyed carnality" emphasises the purely physical attraction felt towards Louis. This reflects societies acceptance of open physical intimacy and lust, which is further, supported by the rhetorical question " Why not have sex with everybody, as long as you wanted them and they wanted you? ". It is evident that this attitude towards sex is shaped by contemporary societies notion that sex is casual and should be shared with whomever you desire. The reader is challenged to consider these attitudes towards love and sexuality and moreover is encouraged to explore the dissimilar attitude towards both universal themes in the different context of the original novel. After reading *The Hours*, readers are inspired to return to the 1920's novel *Mrs Dalloway* in order to further study the themes of death and love. The heroine of the novel, Clarissa Dalloway, instinctively fears death. However the allusion to Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* " Fear no more the heat o' the sun nor the furious winter's rages" displays Mrs Dalloway's attempt to convince herself to overcome her aversion to death and instead fearless embrace the opportunities of life. Despite these efforts, Mrs. Dalloway is forever trying to avoid the notion of death, which is apparent in the rhetorical question " What business had the Bradshaws to talk of death at her party? " which highlights her displeasure that death should interrupt her life. This is also perceptible in the fragmented sentence " Then there was terror; the overwhelming incapacity...this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear" which illustrates her edgy panic at the thought of her life ending. It is clear that by returning to original text a reader is rewarded with a broader understanding of the way the universal

theme of death has been explored in different contexts. Similarly, the notion of love presented in *The Hours*, prompts readers to examine the different exploration of the same theme in the original text, *Mrs Dalloway*. Passion was considered unfavourable which is emphasised in the repetition " Horrible passion! Degrading passion! ". In contrast, love within a supportive marriage was valued which is evident in the affirmation " she had been right not to marry Peter Walsh... she wanted support. " This reflects the conservative attitudes of the early 20th century. There are also very few direct references to sexuality in the novel reflecting the era's suppression of open sexuality. The repetition " Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was. She knew nothing about sex - nothing about social problems' demonstrating Clarissa's ignorance to sexuality, which illustrates the chasteness of her society. It is evident that by returning to the original text readers are able to gain deeper insight into the parallel theme of love and develop an understanding of how changing context impacts the depiction of love and sexuality. After reading Michael Cunningham's appropriation *The Hours* a reader desires to better understand the symbols used in the novel. This provokes them trace the symbols back to their origins in *Mrs Dalloway*. One of the symbols involved in both texts is flowers. In *The Hours*, flowers represent something different for the three main female characters. For Virginia Woolf flowers signify the rest and peace of death. This is seen in the balanced sentences " Virginia looks with unanticipated pleasure at this modest circled of thorns and flowers; this wild deathbed. She would like to lie down on it herself". Yet, for Clarissa Vaughn flowers represent sympathy and compassion emphasised by her choice of

cream roses (a symbol of thoughtfulness) for her sick friend's party. Finally, Laura Brown sees flowers as a way to make up for the mental distance she puts between herself and her family so the "roses surrounded by gifts" is her method of replicating genuine love for her husband. It is evident that the symbol of the flowers has a number of different meanings even within the single novel. However *The Hours* encourages readers to develop a broader understanding of the symbols used in the appropriation and in order to this readers must return to Woolf's original novel. In *Mrs Dalloway* flowers are used to explore the unique personalities of characters and their relationships with others. The surprised tone of "Sally went out, picked hollyhocks, dahlias...cut their heads off, and made them swim on the top of water in bowls. The effect was extraordinary" emphasises the unconventional way Sally Seaton handled flowers and this unusual treatment represents the unorthodox personality of young Miss Seaton. Moreover the red roses Richard Dalloway buys for his wife and the repetition of "I love you" is reflective of the marital bond between the couple. Thus the reader is able to understand the purpose of the symbol of the flowers in the original text, which provides them with a more profound understanding of its use in the appropriation. Finally the simple structure of *The Hours* makes Michael Cunningham's novel accessible to a wide audience. The novel is clearly divided into chapters, each titled by name of the character whose perspective it will be. This enables readers to easily identify when and where the action is taking place. In contrast, Woolf's novel has almost no structure and the stream of consciousness style makes its more difficult to understand. The unmarked changes of perspective and fragmentation of

sentences like “ the cruellest things in the world, she thought, seeing them clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulously dressed; in a mackintosh coat, on the landing; love and religion" reflects the disordered nature of thoughts yet makes the novel challenging to follow. Thus the insight provided in the simpler, appropriated text, encourages readers to then approach the more demanding original novel. It is clear that through the correspondence of the themes and symbols, *The Hours* encourage readers to re-examine Mrs Dalloway in order to establish a more profound understanding of both novels. The universality of the themes of death and love entice readers to discover the changing attitudes towards them as context changes. Likewise, readers are persuaded by the exploration of the symbolic flowers in the appropriated to text, to desire an understanding of its original significance in Mrs Dalloway. Finally, the simpler style of Michael Cunningham’s novel makes it more approachable to a wide audience, and once readers have developed a level of understanding of *The Hours*, they are encouraged to explore the complexities of Mrs Dalloway.