

# The use of intertextuality in postmodern fiction and film



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Discuss the use of intertextuality in postmodern fiction and/or film.

Two examples of intertextuality in fiction and film are *The Hours* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2002) and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). Julia Kristeva theorises that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (1980, p. 66). Postmodern texts suggest that the relationship between text and text is vital in adding a particular layer of depth and meaning. This essay will argue that intertextuality is a device which is used to provide added significance and connotations to a text. *The Hours* and *Oranges* are similar in the way that they use intertextuality to bring key themes and issues into a modern and contemporary light. Additionally, the way in which they each 'absorb' and 'transform' other texts, emphasises the postmodernist awareness that texts do not exist solely in isolation. To echo Kristeva's theory that texts are 'an absorption' (p. 1988, p. 66) of other texts, *The Hours* follows a very similar syntactic structure to *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Both texts follow and tell the story and events of one day and have comparable plot points; buying flowers in the opening scenes, preparations for parties etc. Paul Claes argues that a syntactic structure can be modified in four ways: addition, repetition, substitution and deletion (2011); this theory can be explored in *The Hours*. One key difference is that *The Hours* tells the story of three women rather than just one. This addition is effective as it offers new aspects and insights to *Mrs Dalloway*. For instance, the character of Virginia Woolf depicts the writing process of the novel itself, the character of Laura Brown portrays the reception of *Mrs Dalloway*, and finally, Clarissa's character and storyline highlights the

retelling and update of the novel. Another transformation to *The Hours* is the addition of two new time eras: the early 1950s and the beginning of the twenty-first century. This reconstruction is particularly effective as it highlights the different issues that each woman has in each time period, bringing to light the multiplicity of new problems that arise with modernity. As aforementioned, there are notable points of repetition that crossover in both texts. For instance, all three characters are preparing for a party/event of some kind. They each reflect on a particular experience that resonates with them, and lastly, the topic of suicide or potential suicide is prevalent in both texts. Linda Hutcheon observes that ‘ the multiple and complex echoing points to the different possible functions of intertextuality... can both thematically and formally reinforce the text’s message’ (2003, p. 138). This theory can be applied to *The Hours* as it reinforces the key themes of *Mrs Dalloway* but with the addition of contemporary issues, making it relevant to a modern audience. The intertextuality in *The Hours* can thus be analysed when examining the syntactic structure within both texts and looking at Claes’ theories on addition and repetition of events. Similarly, the syntactic structure of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is comparable to that of the Bible. The eight chapters of the book are named after the first eight books of the Old Testament. In addition, there are perpetual references to biblical stories and quotes are used throughout the novel. For instance, in chapter one, ‘ Genesis’, the story of Jeanette’s adoption is told: ‘ she followed a star until it came to settle above an orphanage, and in that place was a crib, and in that crib, a child. A child with too much hair’ (p. 14). This description mimics the birth of Jesus and the narrative style follows the same technique as the Bible. Additionally, throughout the novel, Jeanette’s mother

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

raises her to be a devout servant of God, just like Jesus, and her life imitates that of a religious quest. Although the description of her adoption echoes that of the birth of Jesus, the additional comment 'a child with too much hair' adds a particular comedic element, differing from the Bible's serious tone. These biblical references are a reflection of Jeanette's home life and her strict Christian upbringing. However, they also act as a metaphorical device that depicts the development of her story and her growth as a person as well. The most obvious crossover between the Bible and *Oranges* is that Jeanette is raised to live her life within the rules of the Bible. The addition and character of Jeanette's mother creates an environment/community in which Jeanette is constantly watched over and judged against the rules of the Bible. If she is to go against them her relationship with both God and her whole community are ruined.

The first chapter narrates Jeanette's adoption and her home-schooled childhood living under a strict household. In reference to Clae's theories of altering the syntactic structure, *Oranges* adds a modern element to the biblical stories whilst simultaneously repeating the chronology of it. As a result, the Bible is brought into the contemporary world, making it relevant to a modern reader. An example of this is at the end of chapter one; Jeanette is forced to start school, leaving the comfortable environment of being home-schooled and her family. The destruction of her secluded bubble can be viewed as her 'Great Flood' which also occurs in the first chapter of the Bible. Furthermore, the following chapter 'Exodus' (meaning exit) documents Jeanette going to school for the first time. It is in this chapter where her religious world and the secular world meet for the first time. This not only results in her two worlds mixing together but it also creates a fusion of genres. Jacques Derrida <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

theorises that 'every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text' (1980, p. 212). This theory can be examined alongside intertextuality and can be applied to *Oranges*. The novel encompasses the classic aspects of a coming of age story but, as aforementioned, is syntactically very similar to the Bible and includes parallel elements and themes; hence conforming to Derrida's theory.

Another element of *The Hours* which incorporates aspects of *Mrs Dalloway* is the intertextual use of characters. In T. S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he suggests that creation and inspiration derive from the shared wisdom of past authors (1919). This theory can be explored in regard to *The Hours* and *Mrs Dalloway* when examining the character crossovers.

Many of the characters share the same names but have a substituted or altered part to play. For example, Clarissa Vaughn shares a number of similarities with the character *Mrs Dalloway*; Clarissa is even gifted the nickname 'Mrs Dalloway' by her friend Richard Brown. They each question whether or not they have chosen the right path in life and there is an indication that they both feel a level of regret in regards to their life choices. However, in reference to Eliot's theory, Cunningham has drawn inspiration from Woolf and creates the character of Sally. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Sally kisses Clarissa which is described as 'the most exquisite moment of her whole life' (1925, p. 35). Despite treasuring the kiss, Clarissa is never able to act on her feelings leaving her with a sense of unfulfillment. However, in *The Hours* Sally is Clarissa Vaughn's partner offering a parallel universe in which *Mrs Dalloway* and Sally are in a relationship. Additionally, with the added modern time period, gay partnerships are seen to be much more widely accepted in comparison to the early 1920s.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

Another example of intertextuality in regards to characters is Septimus Smith and Richard Brown. Both of these characters struggle with mental illness and although the root of their suffering differs, their diagnoses mirror the time period in which each text was written. Septimus Smith is portrayed to be suffering from shell shock as a result of the First World War which is thus relevant to the society of 1925. In contrast, in *The Hours* Richard Brown is suffering from AIDs, a disease that was culturally prevalent during the 1980s-90s. In Kristeva's *Desire in Language*, she argues that in order to understand the meaning of a narrative the relationship between language and society plays a crucial role. Additionally, she observes that semiotics articulate a world of history, society and politics (1969). This theory can be applied to both *The Hours* and *Mrs Dalloway* as they explore historical and societal issues of their time which provide thematic relevance to the reader. Furthermore, both Richard and Septimus are interlinked by their suicides and their similar motives. Septimus kills himself in order to escape from being taken away to a mental institution and consequently jumps out of a window: '[the] melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out' (1925, p. 163). Similarly, Richard wishes to die as he no longer has the will to live. Comparatively, Richard slides gently out of the window quoting Virginia Woolf to Clarissa before he falls: 'I don't think two people could have been happier than we've been'; yet another example of intertextuality. Both Septimus and Richard are examples of individuals who are unable to live and function within their societies; their worlds have been tainted by their illnesses. Roland Barthes argues that texts are a ' multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (1967). This theory can be applied to each text, *The Hours* blends and

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

clashes key aspects from *Mrs Dalloway* and gives them a new light by bringing it into a modern time frame. *Oranges* not only makes direct references to the Bible but has been described by critics as an autobiography of Jeanette's life; thus including a crossover of characters which is comparable to *The Hours*. The character of Jeanette mirrors Winterson and their lives correlate in regards to upbringing, events and relationships. As above stated, *Oranges* incorporates a number of genres and stories. As a result, Winterson argues that the novel is not merely autobiographical: '[it is] an experimental novel: its interests are anti-linear. It offers a complicated narrative structure disguised as a simple one' (2000). She includes mythical stories and also intertwines elements of fairy-tales creating a 'metafiction' (Linda Hutcheon). For example, Jeanette is often seen utilising fairy-tales in order to understand the outside world in comparison to her own world and feelings. Despite this, there are stark similarities to Jeanette's life and Winterson's upbringing, indicating that there is a crossover of characters. Both were brought up in highly religious homes with an overbearing mother, and Winterson grew up reading the Bible which again is a crossover between her life and the biblical references throughout *Oranges*. Additionally, Winterson's lesbianism caused conflict and division with her mother and also congregation which is identical to the character of Jeanette. Linda Hutcheon argues that 'the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel' (2003, p. 124). This theory can be applied to *Oranges*. The autobiographical elements and also the use of Bible intertextuality can be seen as historical aspects which fuse with the fictional narrative of a female Bildungsroman.

Moreover, Jeanette's mother is not only interlinked with Winterson's mother <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

but she is described in 'Genesis' to be an embodiment of the Old Testament. Despite being highly religious, she is a hypocritical character and her acts of goodwill perpetually come from a selfish place. She shares the less forgiving nature of God in the Old Testament, behaving vengefully when she is upset or someone acts in a way that she strongly disagrees with. Furthermore, in the first chapter, Jeanette's mother is comparable to that of the character of Abraham who spread God's teachings to children and followers. She creates Jeanette's initial connection and bond with God and raises her to live her life abiding the strict laws of the Bible. However, despite being her religious teacher, the level of care she has for Jeanette and her Christian morals are in question whenever her daughter is in need of support and guidance. She raises Jeanette to fight against the 'evils' of the world but the level of love she gives is measured by the expectations that Jeanette fulfils. In Linda Hutcheon's chapter 'Parody and the Intertextuality of History,' it states that 'the "world" in which the text situates itself is the "world" of discourse, the "world" of texts and intertexts' (2003, p. 125). This theory can be applied when examining Jeanette's mother. The 'world' and intertexts that *Oranges* is situated in, is heavily religious and so naturally comparisons between Jeanette's mother and religious figures/attitudes are going to occur.

In *The Hours* and *Mrs Dalloway*, both texts share the theme of social roles and the worry of fulfilling them or the unhappiness that has derived from them. Hutcheon theorises that 'in practice, intertexts unavoidably call up contexts: social and political, among others...as it forces us to double our vision' (1989, p. 25). This theory is present in *The Hours* in the form of Laura Brown and the extreme boredom she feels playing her role as a housewife during 1951. Laura is depicted to be deeply unhappy playing the role of

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>



housewife leaving her feeling trapped within her own home. Laura's narrative takes place in a society where it was taught that 'truly feminine women [did] not want careers, higher education, political rights- the independence and the opportunities that the old feminists fought for' (Betty Friedan: 1963, p. 16). As a result, Laura considers suicide as she feels it is the only form of escapism from her mundane life and the only way she can regain freedom. As well as linking to the character of Richard Brown, Septimus Smith is also similar to Laura. Neither of them is able to perform the societal roles of men and women that were forced onto them; their mentalities leaving them as outcasts. As a result of analysing the social contexts of Laura's life, the reader is inclined to draw comparisons in *Mrs Dalloway* echoing Hutcheon's theory on intertexts.

As above-mentioned, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Sally and Clarissa share a forbidden kiss which resonates and sticks with Clarissa for the rest of her life and forces her to question her life choices. Another element of intertextuality in *The Hours* is the kiss that Laura and Kitty share in the kitchen. Laura is in the process of comforting Kitty and embraces her, as she lifts her head they kiss one another. Although appearing to be flustered Laura regains her composure and does not seem to regret the kiss. The kiss that Laura shares with Kitty is portrayed to be one that is desperate for a human intimacy; she feels a disconnection with her husband and so tries to find solace and empathy in Kitty. The kiss occurs for a different reason than *Mrs Dalloway*'s with Sally. It is used to further emphasise the deep unhappiness that Laura feels in regards to her relationship and life in general. This is therefore relevant when examining Kristeva's theory of authors transforming and absorbing texts (1988).

Similar to *The Hours*, *Oranges* questions the  
<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

rules of society and the roles of both men and women. One of the main themes throughout the story is Jeanette coming to terms with her sexuality. The Bible, Jeanette's mother and her community view the world in binary terms; something is good or evil, there is no in between. However, Jeanette's lesbianism defies these terms and she is rejected by her family and friends, leaving her outside of the binary set of rules. Similar to Laura in *The Hours*, Jeanette is portrayed to want to go against the traditional roles of women in society and depicts a sense of unfulfillment with her current surroundings. Jeanette's mother works desperately to try and hide her from the evils of the world, that, of course, being homosexuality and forces her to comply with gender norms. The intertextuality of the Bible is effective as it adds a level of forbiddances that Jeanette ultimately acts against. Furthermore, the inclusion of fairy-tale elements aids Jeanette in being able to understand her sexual preferences and love for Melanie. For example, many of the gender roles are substituted and switched around in many of the classic fairy-tales. Another example of the standard gender roles being disrupted in *Oranges* is that Jeanette's father is not really present in the story and she is taught from a young age that men were something you simply had to put up with: "As far as I was concerned, men were something you had around the place, not particularly interesting, but quite harmless" (p. 132). Her mother holds the most authority in the household, which ultimately goes against the standard 'nuclear family'.

Jeanette's rejections of binary roles are similar to that of Julia Kristeva and her theories of sexuality and most prevalently, gender merely being a social construct rather than being inherent. Kristeva calls the language world of culture and meaning the 'symbolic' which is associated with structure, <https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

masculinity and also the law. A child must enter this world in order to separate from the mother and gain their own sense of identity; this process is called abjection (1980). In contrast, the 'semiotic' is a realm which is closely associated with femininity and is deemed to be 'matriarchal'. It is argued that 'the semiotic aspect is repressed not only by society but also by the patriarchal aspect of language [called] the symbolic' (Sadehi: 2012, p. 1491). In regards to *Oranges*, Jeanette eventually establishes her own sense of identity and she is driven by semiotic language which 'shows the speaker's inner drives and impulses' (Sadehi: 2012, p. 1491). She refuses to follow the strict structure of the Bible and its set of conformities-which can be seen as a metaphor for the symbolic. The intertextuality of the Bible and its references means that there is a constant reminder that Jeanette is fighting against the binary environment that she has been brought up in. To conclude, it is clear that both *The Hours* and also *Oranges* conform to postmodern ideas that a text cannot exist solely in isolation (Roland Barthes). *The Hours* takes inspiration from *Mrs Dalloway* and makes modern adaptations, making the original text more relevant to a modern reader. Its key themes are very similar, and as mentioned, many of the plot points are repeated but with a modern twist. This echoes Kristeva's theories of a text absorbing and transforming another text, indicating that the relationship between text and text is as significant in postmodern work as the relationship between the reader and the text. Similarly, *Oranges* includes elements from the Bible and also aspects of fairy-tales. This use of intertextuality acts as a framework for Jeanette's life and affects the way in which she lives it. Jeanette defies these rules of the Bible and acts against them, leaving her mother and community behind as a result. Both *Oranges*

<https://assignbuster.com/the-use-of-intertextuality-in-postmodern-fiction-and-film/>

and *The Hours* provide depth and are two examples of postmodern texts that are unapologetic in their awareness that texts can never be original.

Word Count- 3, 132

### References

- Barthes, R. 1967. 'The Death of the Author'. Aspen, volume 5-6 (1967).
- Brooks, L. 2000. 'Power Surge'. [online]<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/02>.
- Claes, P. 2011. *Echo's echo's De Kunst van de allusie*. Vantilt, Uitgeverij.
- Daldry, S. 2002. *The Hours*. Scott Rudin Productions.
- Derrida, J. and Ronell, A. 1980. The Law of Genre. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), pp. 55-81.
- Eliot, T. [1919] 1982. Tradition and the Individual Talent. *Perspecta*, 19, p. 36.
- Friedan, B. 1963. *The Feminine Mystique*. W. W Norton & Company: New York.
- Hutcheon, L. 2003 *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Routledge.
- Kristeva, J. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sadehi, C. 2012. 'Beloved and Julia Kristeva's The Semiotic and The Symbolic'. University of Amin: Iran.
- Winterson, J, 1985. *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. New York: Grove Press.

- Woolf, V. 1925. *Mrs Dalloway* . New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.