

The Reinforcement and Loss of Parallels in *The Hours*

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The Hours written by Michael Cunningham depicts three generations of women sharing similar situations as that in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The first woman is Virginia Woolf writing *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1923 and suffering from her mental illness. The second one is Mrs. Brown, whose husband is a World War II veteran, being pregnant with her second child, reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1949, and planning her husband's birthday party. The third one is Clarissa Vaughan, a bisexual, planning a party in 2001 to celebrate for her good friend and former lover, Richard, who just receives a major literary award and is dying because of AIDS.

Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, is the inspiration for Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. The correlated stories of the three women in *The Hours* follow the narrative lines of *Mrs. Dalloway*, which tells the story of an upper-class woman in London preparing for a party. Woolf's novel depicts Mrs. Dalloway's single day. It goes in and out of the consciousness of Mrs. Dalloway's family and friends to portray Mrs. Dalloway and the world she lives in. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf brings up some issues like mental illness, social oppression, and death, etc. Cunningham also writes about these issues in *The Hours*. Not only does Virginia Woolf serve as the inspiration for *The Hours*, but she also appears as a major character in the novel. Cunningham places the three women in their own one-day life, same as Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The actions take place in three different years and alternate among them.

The movie version follows the general structure and storyline but it tells the story in different ways. Unlike the novel version of *The Hours*, which is limited to the words, the movie uses some filming techniques and adjusts the story to enhance the parallels among three women. However, due to these changes and different interpretations, the parallels and meanings in the original story are lost or altered.

There is not only reinforcement but also loss of the parallels in the movie. By examining the formal and technical elements in the movie adaption, and studying the forms of the novel, it's clear that the two versions are different texts with different presentation of parallels. The difference in formal and textual arrangement also shapes the meanings of the works. Crucial formal elements include: the arrangement of plots, the frames, and the narrative point of view.

The movie begins with Virginia Woolf's suicide by drowning herself in the river, which is as same as the prologue in the novel, *The Hours*. The narrator is Woolf herself. She writes her suicide note with a trembling hand. She ends her note by saying, "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been" (Bell and Garnett). The scene then successively goes to the three mornings in different time and space: Mrs. Brown in Los Angeles in 1949, Virginia Woolf in Richmond in 1923, and finally Clarissa Vaughan in New York in 2001. Although they live in separate space-time, the alternation of frames makes them synchronized. They wake up and clean up at the same time. The main scene goes back to Virginia. After talking to her husband, she goes upstairs, sits down, and grabs her stationary. The scene jumps to Mrs. Brown, opening her book, Mrs. Dalloway. Next, Clarissa is also about to write something. It goes back to Virginia, coming up with the first sentence of her novel. Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. Mrs. Brown reads this sentence aloud. Clarissa tells her companion, Sally, that she will buy the flowers herself.

The novel doesn't tell the story in the way like the movie does. It also alternates among three protagonists but it doesn't jump fast. Otherwise, it will lose the linearity and become fragmentary. For example, after the prologue, the first woman who appears in the story is Clarissa. The author writes about her walks on the street, how

she feels about the morning in June, who she meets, and what she does. And then the story jumps to Mrs. Woolf, pondering on how to start the first sentence in Mrs. Dalloway. Each of the three protagonists is written in separate parts of the story. These parts alternate with one another. The movie, on the other hand, leads the audience directly to the similar situations of the three women by alternating the frames among them. Without a narrator, the audience still can expect that the three characters must share certain connections.

The movie sometimes connects three protagonists with Woolf's interior monologue as a narrator. When Woolf is addressing to herself the sentences that she is writing in Mrs. Dalloway, the frames go to the other two women. It shows as if Woolf is writing a story about the other two, which also indicates the interconnection of the novel and the three women. In one scene, Woolf is soliloquizing in her mind when writing Mrs. Dalloway: "A women's whole life, in a single day. Just one day, and in that day, her whole life." As Woolf's inner voice is going, the scene goes to Clarissa and then quickly jumps to Mrs. Brown. In another scene, Mrs. Brown is in a hotel and is preparing to commit suicide. Before she makes up her mind, she takes out Mrs. Dalloway from her purse and starts to read it:

"Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking toward Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? It is possible to die" (Cunningham 150).

In this part, the frames switch constantly between Mrs. Brown and Woolf. It is the same part of Mrs. Dalloway that Mrs. Brown is reading and Woolf is having in mind. After Woolf tells her niece that she was going to kill her Dalloway but she has changed her mind, the scene quickly goes to Mrs. Brown suddenly deciding not to commit suicide.

The movie tends to make some important parts of the novel interact with one another. In addition to changing the frames, it requires rearrangement of plots. Take the part of Mrs. Brown's intended suicide for example. In the novel, there is one part, which writes about Mrs. Brown's suicide and later is Woolf's part of deciding not to let Mrs. Dalloway suicide. They are separated. On the other hand, the movie combines and shows them in a rather dramatic way in order to amplify the parallels. Also, it's impossible in the novel that the three women can be connected with Woolf's narrating. The movie sometimes puts Woolf's thinking process before the other two women, which adjusts the original sequences.

The movie version makes some parallels clearer with its different interpretation; however, there is also loss of parallels due to the changes. One of the major changes is the narrative point of view. Michael Cunningham writes *The Hours* in a narrative style called stream of consciousness, pioneered by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. The flowing thoughts and perceptions of protagonists are depicted in a form of discourse. The narrative point of view of *The Hours* is third-person narration. An uninvolved narrator tells the story, describes characters' thought, and narrates the monologue of each protagonist. As a result, in the novel, the thoughts and memory of the protagonists are more prominent than physical actions. The massive parts of describing protagonists' consciousness are important because they highlight the three women's attitude towards the world and their daily lives. Readers can know protagonist's past when they are in the process of recalling the old days.

However, there is no narrator in the film. There is no presentation of monologues while audience can hear Woolf's thinking process sometimes and some inner thoughts of protagonists are arranged to show in different ways. Some parallels of themes or symbols, therefore, are dimmed and even can't be detected. The novel starts with

Virginia Woolf's suicide in a river. She is pulled away by the current with a rock in her pocket but still able to perceive the world above the water. Though Virginia ends her life in the river, at the moment of drowning she transcends her body and sees the world with profound lucidity. Soon after this scene, Clarissa steps out of her house into the New York morning, which echoes the first scene of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. She compares going out into the day to entering a swimming pool.

“The vestibule door opens onto a June morning so fine and scrubbed Clarissa pauses at the threshold as she would at the edge of a pool, watching the turquoise water lapping at the tiles, the liquid nets of sun wavering in the blue depths. As if standing at the edge of a pool she delays for a moment the plunge, the quick membrane of chill, the plain shock of immersion” (Cunningham 9).

Clarissa's everyday life comforts her as if she were underwater. However, the prologue implies that Clarissa is drowning in her existence. Despite her love for the ordinary life, she is in the risk of being consumed like Virginia. In the movie adaptation, this parallel of water is neglected.

Moreover, it fails to show Clarissa's delicate feelings toward the fresh morning in June: "What a thrill, what a shock, to be alive on a morning in June, prosperous, almost scandalously privileged, with simple errand to run" (Cunningham 10). One of the themes of *The Hours* is the importance of ordinary life. The women try to find meanings and significance in every aspect and every hour of the world. For example, in the novel version of *The Hours*, Clarissa has profound revelation as walking down the street: the sight of a woman singing in the park makes her think about the history of the city she loves, and a glimpse of a movie star causes her to consider that fame can make people immortal. In Virginia's last words, she says to her husband, "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been." The moment and the

hours they had are not the beginning of happiness. It is happiness. Clarissa also has the same perception that the summer she spent with Richard was happiness. It was that moment. There has been no other. The movie can't reinforce this idea because it lacks of detailed description of the protagonists' consciousness. It is hard to find the parallels of cherishing daily lives among three women.

Domestic objects are depicted precisely and vividly in the novel, conveying that the domestic life of each protagonist is significant. Virginia Woolf feels frustrated by her life in the suburb and wants to return to London. She has trouble with the tasks of managing a household. Mrs. Brown feels confined by her role as a housewife, and she questions the value of the simple pleasures of domesticity. Clarissa loves her apartment and her life but she feels ambivalent about the choices she has made and sometimes feels alienated from the domestic objects. In the novel, domestic objects are often described in certain color such as Clarissa's white plates, Mrs. Brown's blue bowl and yellow kitchen, Richard's blue pajamas, Laura's yellow kitchen, and the white night table in the attic bedroom at Wellfleet where Clarissa places her book. These colors mirror the moods and tones of the scenes. Nevertheless, the movie adaption doesn't focus on the detailed description of domestic objects. It doesn't make the significance of domestic life apparent.

The movie version of *The Hours* tells the story in ways that the novel can't do. A lot of parallels appear clear and enable the audience to connect the three women easily. On the other hand, due to the time limit of movie and the differences between words and image, the movie adaption can't fully cover the meanings, themes, and parallels in the novel. Also, the stream-of-consciousness style is hard to be displayed by images. Compared with the novel, the movie is a rather condensed version lack of details to intensify certain parallels. To conceive the integrity of *The Hours*, either

reading the novel or watching the movie is not enough. It is necessary to combine both of them so they can compensate for each other.

Works Cited

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