
Themes of Memory And Role Play Explored in the Hours

Among the many themes explored in *The Hours* is the effect that certain pivotal moments have on our lives. The first and most obvious of these moments is described in the prologue: Virginia weighs herself down with stones and walks into the river. This moment affects the reader's reaction to the rest of the book because the interpretations of Virginia's story are always colored by the knowledge that she will eventually take her own life. In a similar sense, Clarissa's relationships with Richard and Louis are colored by her memories of them as teenagers. She thinks of these memories as a permanent part of her: "She will always have been standing on a high dune in the summer. She will always have been young and indestructibly healthy, a little hung over, wearing Richard's cotton sweater as he wraps a hand around her neck and Louis stands slightly apart, watching the waves." Like Virginia, Laura's consideration of suicide hangs over her head for most of the book.

The idea of suicide as an escape is one that is particularly important throughout the book. Various characters turn to their imaginations as a means of escaping from the worlds in which they live. Most obviously, Laura seems to be trapped in her role as a wife and mother. When she bakes her cake for Dan's birthday, she remakes it to perfection but realizes while looking at it that it will never give her the satisfaction that a work of art would. In her own words, "there's nothing really wrong with it, but she'd imagined something more... this cake she's produced feels small, not just in the physical sense but as an entity." She is in a sense acting out the creative process, but she realizes that her play-acting will not be enough to fulfill her. She gets her inspiration to create from her musings on the life of Virginia Woolf, for whom creating was everything. Virginia, in contrast, feels largely incompetent in her day-to-day life; it is only in creating worlds that she feels competent. After an awkward confrontation with her cook that leaves her flustered and frustrated, she resolves to give her character "great skill with servants, a manner that is intricately kind and commanding. Her servants will love her. They will do more than she asks." Clarissa Dalloway does not create her own worlds for escape; instead, she dwells on the worlds of her memory. She reflects that, in a way, her memories will "accompany her forever." The memories of her past inform her present because it is so hard to separate her current self from her former self, or her memories of the Richard in her past from the Richard in her present. In a similar sense, reading *Mrs. Dalloway* influences Laura's perspective on life by offering her the opportunity to "visit" a different world in her mind.

Cunningham says of Laura and her neighbor Kitty, "They are each impersonating someone. They are weary and beleaguered; they have taken on such enormous work." The "enormous work" that Laura has taken on is relegated to her by her role as wife and mother. In many ways, she has been forced into this role by the expectations of the people around her. Cunningham

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writes, "Laura is married to a celebrated boy, a war hero, from Kitty's graduating class and has joined the aristocracy in much the way a homely German princess, no longer young, might find herself seated on a throne beside an English king." The phrasing suggests that Laura's place in life has not been of her own volition, but rather relegated to her by some greater force. Virginia, too, is forced to comply with the expectations of society, with varying degrees of success. She feels incompetent when dealing with her servant as though she is not the person in charge, and she even reflects that her mother and sister had a way with the help that she does not. It is expected that a woman of her class should know how to deal with servants, and because she feels so strangely shy around her cook, she feels as though she has failed at this basic requirement of her household. Clarissa, on the other hand, seems much less distressed by the roles she is expected to fill. Though she does question whether her quietly domestic life is really fulfilling, she does take honest pleasure in the simple routines of her life. In this way, she is the character most at home in the life she lives.

Virginia is depicted throughout the book as a tortured-artist figure, which is not at all farfetched in light of the historical evidence of her manic depression and her eventual suicide. Her attitude toward her work is that it is something over which she does not have full, conscious control. She is at one point "fearful that her day's writing (that fragile impulse, that egg balanced on a spoon) might dissolve before one of Nelly's moods." That image stands in stark contrast with the image of Laura calmly and methodically baking a cake that is pointedly not a work of art. The link between creativity and instability, whether mental or domestic, is strong and carries the implication that the two share a causal relationship -- that is, that creativity is a symptom of instability, or vice versa.

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