

# Virginia Woolf cannot be held responsible

## The Hours

David Walsh  
23 January 2003

*The Hours*, directed by Stephen Daldry, screenplay by David Hare, based on the novel by Michael Cunningham

*The Hours* is a sadly faithful adaptation (by playwright David Hare) of Michael Cunningham's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. The novel, in turn, was inspired in part by British author Virginia Woolf's writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925. ("The Hours" was Woolf's working title for her book.) The latter recounts one day in the life of an upper middle class woman in London, her husband and circle of friends. As she goes about her mundane activities, she recalls episodes decades before that might have changed her life.

*The Hours*, directed by Stephen Daldry (*Billy Elliot*), is silly and essentially insufferable, a *cri de coeur* on behalf of the sensitive few (mostly repressed homosexuals apparently) suffering horribly at the hands of the insensitive and boorish multitude. Self-involved and self-important to a dangerously high degree, *The Hours*, more generally, speaks to and for that section of the American middle class (a good portion of it residing in Manhattan) that considers its personal and professional activities the final word in human affairs.

The film and Cunningham's work treat three women in different time periods: Woolf, beginning her novel in 1923 (and, briefly, taking her own life 18 years later); Laura Brown, an unhappy housewife contemplating her existence in post-World War II, suburban Los Angeles; Clarissa Vaughan (in 2001), a middle class New Yorker preparing a party in honor of a longtime friend, a poet dying of AIDS.

Each segment deals with one day's events in the life of the given female character (as does *Mrs. Dalloway*). The Woolf (Nicole Kidman) episode centers on the novelist's writing efforts and her struggles with mental instability. Woolf also battles with the servants (insensitive clods) and receives a visit from her sister Vanessa and her nephews (young and insensitive clods) and delicate niece. Much of this portion of the film is taken up by images of Kidman, head tilted and chin pointed toward her chest, scowling and taking drags on a cigarette. We can easily see by this both that she is suffering and that she is a serious artist.

Husband—and prominent Fabian socialist and publisher—Leonard Woolf is extremely protective. The couple has moved to the London suburbs to relieve Virginia of social and psychological pressures, but after eight years she is chafing at the sedate life-style and wants to return to the metropolis. When she flees her home and makes her way to the nearest train station, Leonard pursues her. A sharp exchange takes place. He reminds her of her history and their reasons for originally leaving London. Between the suburbs and death, she breathlessly intones, I choose death!

This peculiar little scene and its prominence in both book and film, as the climactic episode of the Woolf segment, is revealing. While not a word is seriously paid to the writer's fiction or her and her husband's ideas (socialism, feminism, pacifism, etc.), much less to the character of the epoch, this "lifestyle" choice is made into a life-and-death issue. But then—judging by the paltry results, by and large, of their artistic or scholarly labors—one assumes that contemporary intellectuals *have to be*

putting most of their creative energy into such earthshaking considerations as where to reside, where to dine and which social function to attend.

In modern-day New York, book editor Clarissa Vaughan (Meryl Streep), a modern-day Mrs. Dalloway, goes about her daily routine, which includes visiting her AIDS-stricken friend Richard (Ed Harris). She and Richard had an affair decades ago, but each in the end chose to pursue same-sex relationships. Richard is a poet about to receive a prestigious award and has written a novel—in which a character based on Clarissa plays a leading role—that is considered "difficult." We never learn the first thing about either his prose or poetry. Louis (Jeff Daniels), the man for whom Richard gave up Clarissa, makes an unexpected appearance.

Clarissa, in the spirit of Mrs. Dalloway, recollects the episodes decades before, when she was young and, according to Cunningham's novel, "anything could happen, anything at all." Nothing much did happen, however, and life has continued to be relatively uneventful. Clarissa cannot make up her mind whether her life has amounted to something or not, but she does have this revelation: "I remember thinking, 'This is the beginning of happiness.' That's what I thought. 'So this is the feeling. This is where it starts. And of course there'll always be more.' It never occurred to me: It wasn't the beginning. It *was* happiness. It was the moment, right then."

The sensitive souls responsible for the book and film, who have no intention themselves, one suspects, of settling for such isolated moments of happiness, offer this soothing banality as a kind of consolation to the less fortunate who may experience a considerable amount of drudgery and regret, even resentment or anger, in their lives.

The novel concludes on this note: "Yes, Clarissa thinks, it's time for the day to be over. We throw our parties; we abandon our families to live alone in Canada; we struggle to write books that do not change the world, despite our gifts and our unstinting efforts, our most extravagant hopes. We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep—it's as simple and ordinary as that." Had this insight, found on page 225, been placed instead on the opening page the reader might have spared him or herself the trouble of wading through events which all go to prove, apparently, that life simply *is* and, what's more, that people do various things during the daytime and later go to bed.

The book (and the film captures its essence) belongs to a genre of carefully and self-consciously crafted, understated little novels about people and relationships, published by the dozen each year, that manage to ignore all the critical moral and social questions of our time. The most cleverly written of these, books that with "deep empathy" and "extraordinary resonance," in "rich and beautifully nuanced scenes" characterized by "mesmerizing" and "crystalline" prose (to quote from the praise for *The Hours*), say nothing very much at all, win literary prizes and have films made from them.

What strikes one most about the contemporary sequences in particular in both the novel and the film is the blinding self-absorption and complacency. This is a privileged layer scrutinizing and being scrutinized.

The life led by Clarissa Vaughan and her lover, Sally, is described in Cunningham's book in the following terms: "Two floors and a garden in the West Village! They are rich, of course; obscenely rich by the world's standards; but not *rich* rich, not New York City rich." The "of course" is a nice touch.

The attitude reserved for those lesser creatures who also inhabit the city is summed up neatly in the following passage devoted to the state of Clarissa and Sally's relationship: "'I love you' has become almost ordinary, being said not only on anniversaries and birthdays but spontaneously, in bed or at the kitchen sink or even in cabs within hearing of foreign drivers who believe women should walk three paces behind their husbands." It must be painful for these delicate ladies even to have dealings with such backward "foreign" types.

And then there is the scene in the book (not included in the film) when Sally is having lunch with a film star: "There is no more powerful force in the world, she thinks, than fame." Wealthy, offhandedly racist and obsessed with celebrity—the author, more or less inadvertently, has captured something essential about a social layer in contemporary Manhattan.

The post-World War II portion of the film has its own unpleasantness. Poor Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), nearly catatonic, is stuck in a marriage with an ordinary fellow who adores her. She has one son, obviously a sensitive boy, and another child on the way. She is reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and this helps her see the awfulness of her own life. It also encourages her to kiss a woman neighbor (Woolf's character remembers the excitement of kissing a female friend years before) out of the blue. (Symmetrically, each of the female characters gets to kiss another woman.)

It is her husband's birthday and she has to bake not one, but two cakes, recognizing all the while the emptiness and pointlessness of such an act. Poor Laura! It is nighttime and her husband asks meaningfully, not once, but twice, "Are you coming to bed?" Laura decides thereupon that she will abandon her family as soon as the baby is born. Numbed and revolted by this stultifying existence and her husband's sexual brutishness, she runs away and in an act of bohemian abandon ... becomes a librarian in Toronto. The inspired strokes in *The Hours* are simply laid on one after another.

Whatever her limitations may have been, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) cannot be held responsible for *The Hours*. Her *Mrs. Dalloway*, although it contains qualities, at its weakest, that may have encouraged Cunningham in his efforts, is an attempt above all to come to terms with British society, or at least segments of it, in the wake of the mass slaughter of the imperialist war. Woolf noted at the time that the "vast catastrophe of the European War" had frozen the population's emotions and that they "had to be broken up for us and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them." The book's leading characters include a World War I veteran, whose experiences in the trenches have permanently traumatized him and who eventually takes his own life.

The element of social critique is never absent in Woolf's work. In this study of a middle-aged woman, Clarissa Dalloway, it is combined with more general considerations about the promise of youth gone unfulfilled. As one commentator notes, "Richard Dalloway [her husband] was to be the prime minister of England; now he will not make the cabinet. Peter Walsh [her suitor decades before] was to go out to India and become a great writer; he has not written a word. Sally Seton was to be a socialist who [would] put an end to private property; instead she married a factory owner and produced five strapping sons."

In Woolf's work, in my view, there is always a conflict between a rather anemic and claustrophobic upper middle class self-involvement and a more penetrating, sharp-eyed and self-critical approach to reality. She referred once to her "terror of real life" and, unhappily, there is something to the comment. The attraction to social reformism had perhaps both class

and psychological roots. In any event, the emphasis in her works on ordinariness, the incremental, the mundane seems in part the literary corollary of the Fabian's "gradualism" and "socialism through attrition." One can certainly argue whether Woolf grasped or was capable of grasping the depth of the social crisis in Britain in *Mrs. Dalloway*, a book published on the eve of the bitterly fought General Strike of 1926. The novelist always draws back from the sharpest criticism.

Nonetheless, there is in every one of Woolf's works a genuine concern with the welfare of humanity and the state of society, and not simply, as we find in *The Hours*, a complacent celebration of the privileged Manhattanite's daily routine. While Woolf had one foot in the camp of official society, she was able to bring to bear an honest and questioning intellect to her work. Cunningham keeps no distance whatsoever from the privileged, insulated world he inhabits and writes about; he is entirely of this milieu.

Woolf may be at her best in *Mrs. Dalloway* when she turns to social satire, skewering figures of the British establishment, individuals and types she obviously knew well.

Here is a remarkable passage devoted to Sir William Bradshaw, a prestigious physician and "expert" in shell-shock cases.

"Sir William replied that life was good. Certainly Lady Bradshaw in ostrich feathers hung over the mantelpiece, and as for his income it was quite twelve thousand a year. But to us, they [his patients] protested, life has given no such bounty. He acquiesced. They lacked a sense of proportion. And perhaps, after all, there is no God? He shrugged his shoulders. In short, this living or not living is an affair of our own? But there they were mistaken. Sir William had a friend in Surrey where they taught, what Sir William frankly admitted was a difficult art—a sense of proportion. There were, moreover, family affection; honour; courage; and a brilliant career. All of these had in Sir William a resolute champion. If they failed him, he had to support police and the good of society, which, he remarked very quietly, would take care, down in Surrey, that these unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by the lack of good blood, were held in control. And then stole out from her hiding-place and mounted her throne that Goddess whose lust is to override opposition, to stamp indelibly in the sanctuaries of others the image of herself. Naked, defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless received the impress of Sir William's will. He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up. It was this combination of decision and humanity that endeared Sir William so greatly to the relations of his victims."

And another, depicting Lady Millicent Bruton, a fashionable aristocrat:

"For she never spoke of England, but this isle of men, this dear, dear land, was in her blood (without reading Shakespeare), and if ever a woman could have worn the helmet and shot the arrow, could have led troops to attack, ruled with indomitable justice barbarian hordes and lain under a shield noseless in a church, or made a green grass mound on some primeval hillside, that woman was Millicent Bruton. Debarred by her sex and some truancy, too, of the logical faculty (she found it impossible to write a letter to the *Times*), she had the thought of Empire always at hand, and had acquired from her association with that armoured goddess her ramrod bearing, her robustness of demeanour, so that one could not figure her even in death parted from the earth or roaming territories over which, in some spiritual shape, the Union Jack had ceased to fly. To be not English even among the dead—no, no! Impossible!"

And as for Woolf's suicide, which the film treats merely as the inevitable product of her individual mental difficulties, it is worth bearing in mind the date, March 1941. By this time Hitler's forces had conquered a number of European countries. As one commentator notes: "The Woolfs lived each day as though it well might be their last. Terrified of an invasion because Leonard was Jewish, they had the means at hand to take their lives." Convinced that her personal and social world was coming to an end, and once again feeling the onset of madness, Woolf drowned

herself in a river near her home. It would require artists with a larger perspective and greater historical and psychological sensitivity than Cunningham and Daldry possess to do justice to this tragic act and the life and art that went before it.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**